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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARCH

IN THE WESTERN TRADITION
by Phyllis Eisenstein

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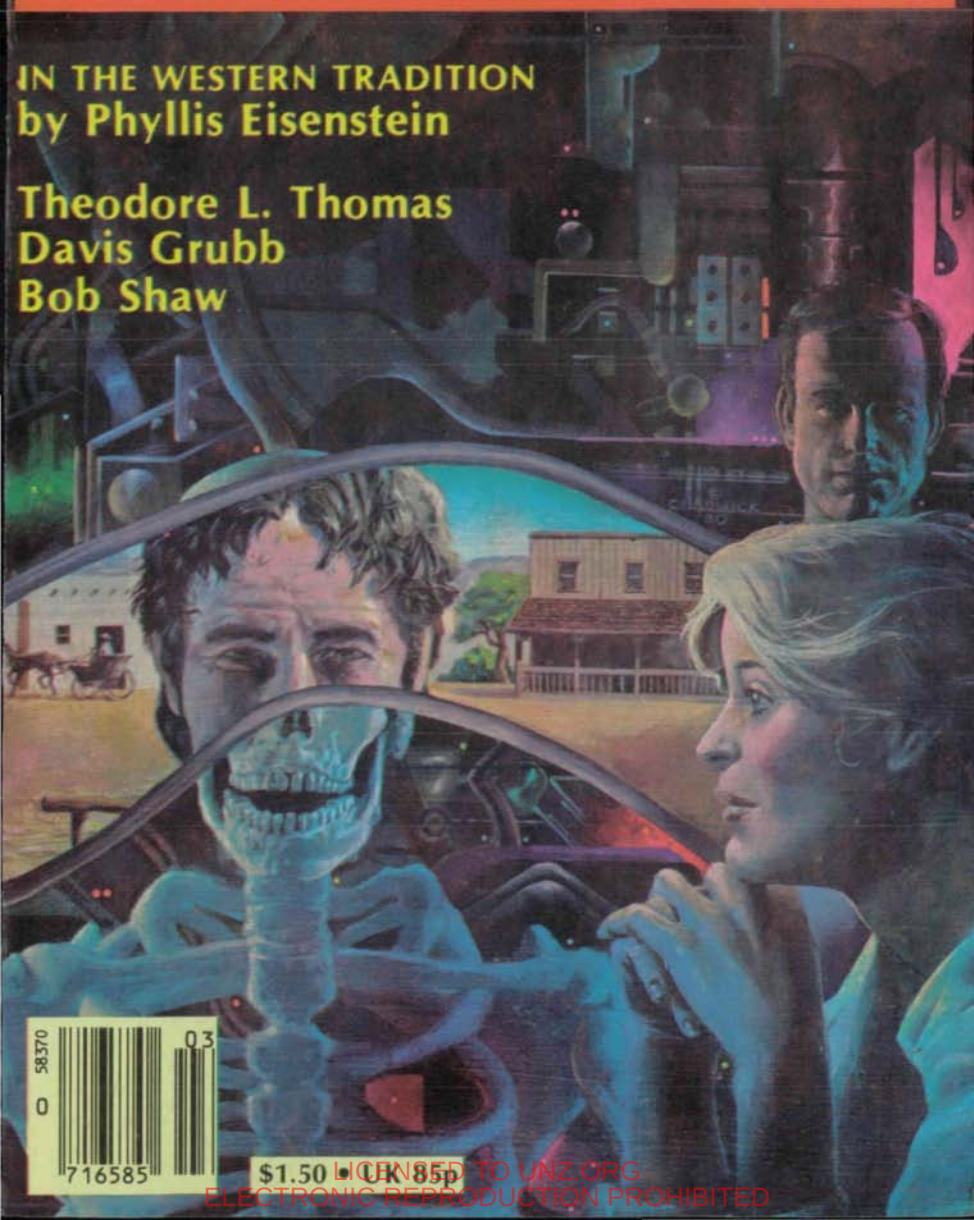

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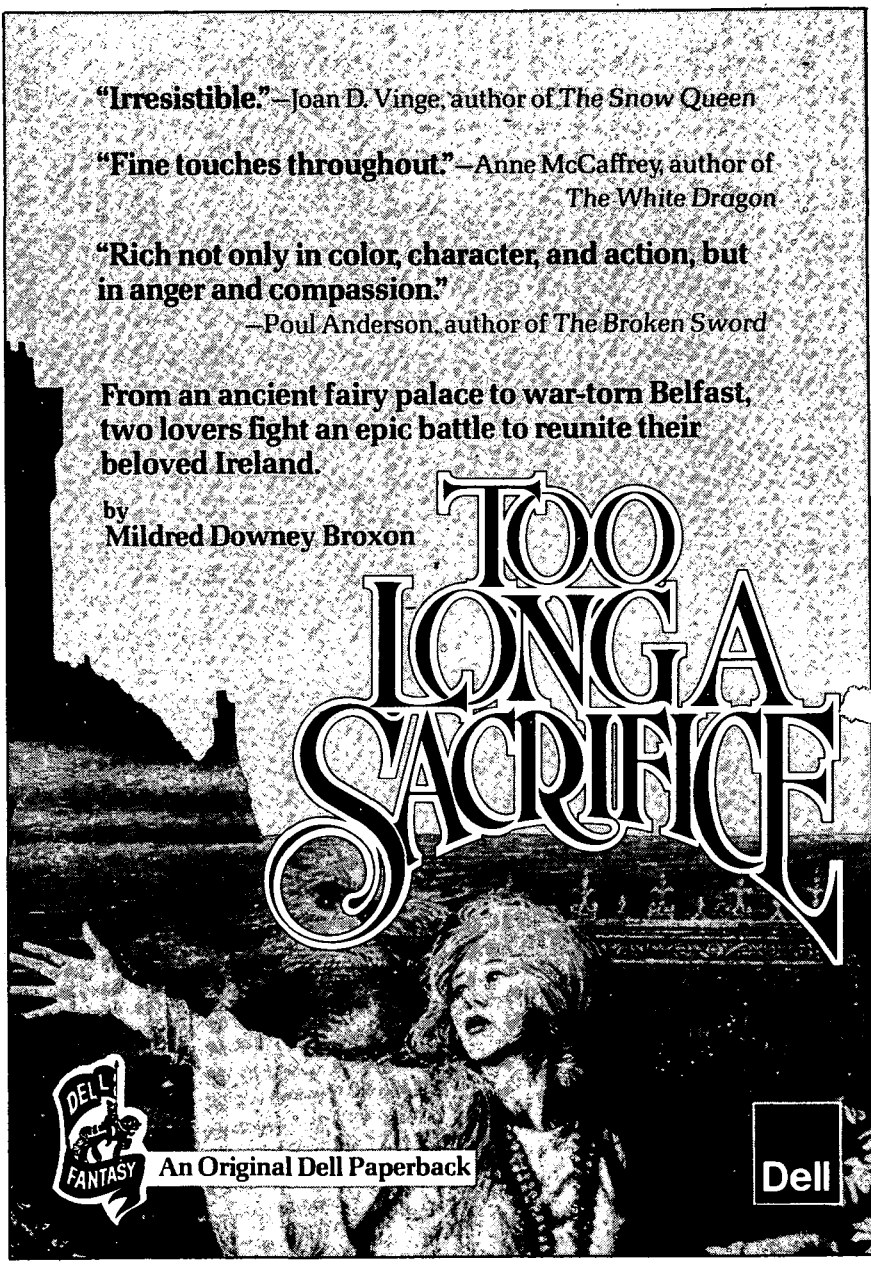
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In the Western

BY

PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

It was obvious from his reaction that Holland had never bought time on the Bubble before. He could scarcely sit still in his chair. "That's him! That's him!" he shouted. He was grinning like a child on Christmas morning, surrounded by toys.

I knew how he felt. I would never forget my own first assignment, and my first view of the man I sought. Holland knew his quarry from photographs; I had only stone likenesses to guide me. Yet I knew him immediately, though the statues had been idealized, youthful, flawless. That was back in the beginning, when almost all of us were involved in the Life of Jesus Project based in Istanbul. I was assigned to the western branch—the less important one, I thought. But my hands started to shake when I saw my man in the Forum, shaking as hard as if I were seeing Jesus himself, and they kept shaking while I brought his face closer and closer, close enough that he could have spit in my eye if he had not been just an image in the Bubble. Augustus Caesar, dead two thousand years, was in that moment as real to me as any of my fellow Bubble operators, and the most significant man in history. Yes, I knew how Dr. Frederick Holland felt. And no matter how often I sat at the console, or even just watched another operator at work, I still experienced a strong echo of that initial thrill every

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Tradition

time I saw the Bubble spring into being from nothingness in a small, bare room. For I knew that within its confines the dead would walk again. Holland had known that, I supposed, on an intellectual level; now he knew it as I did, in his soul.

I sat behind him, a casual visitor to his enterprise. I was there because I never tired of watching the Bubble and because Alison and I would be going out to dinner as soon as she finished her shift. To my left, she played on the computer and gave Holland what he had paid for—Ellsworth, Kansas, August 18, 1873:

Wyatt Earp took a seat under the wooden awning that shaded Beebe's General Store from the scorching afternoon sun. He tipped the chair back against the weathered clapboard wall and surveyed the street from beneath the wide brim of his dark hat. Beyond him, the town stretched hot and dusty to the railroad tracks, and in the distance, long-horned cattle could be seen moving sluggishly as they grazed on an endless expanse of prairie grass.

Earp turned his face toward us; gaunt, hollow-cheeked, he appeared to be in his early twenties, not yet the legend he would become in Dodge and Tombstone. His eyes focused briefly on something we could not see.

"Shall I turn the viewpoint and catch what he's looking at?" Alison asked.

Holland shook his head violently. "No, stay where you are. We can check that out in another session."

A muffled uproar heralded the appearance of two men: they burst from a doorway down the street, shouting curses over their shoulders.

"The Thompsons," said Holland. "Ben and Bill."

They crossed the square at a run and entered a two-story building whose sun-bleached sign said GRAND CENTRAL HOTEL.

Earp rose from his chair, tall and loose-limbed, and stepped into the doorway of Beebe's, flattening himself against the jamb. Up and down the street, people peered out of other doorways, roused by the clamor but unwilling to come out into the sunlight.

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Quick footsteps sounded nearby, hard heels on the boards of the sidewalk; a man materialized from nothing directly in front of the console, his back to us. He was short and stocky, and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up over thick, gray-haired forearms. He wore a sweat-stained vest.

"Whitney," said Holland.

Whitney stopped by Earp. "What's going on?" he asked.

Earp shook his head.

"Now Logan," whispered Holland.

More footsteps, very fast this time, and a young man—scarcely more than a boy, really—appeared abruptly to clutch at Whitney's arm. "I ran to find you as soon as it happened, sheriff." He was breathing hard, and his dark hair was plastered in wet points against his forehead. "Bill Thompson got nasty drunk, and John Sterling gave him the flat of his hand across the mouth. When Bill invited John to get a gun and meet him outside, John hit him again and knocked him out of his seat. Then Bill and Ben ran after their guns."

Whitney turned, fists on his hips, and I could see the glint of the metal star on his vest.

By this time the Thompsons had returned to the street with gunbelts, shotgun, and rifle and were standing behind a hay wagon, shouting threats toward the saloon.

"All right," said Whitney. "We can't have this." He started across the street toward the wagon.

"You keep out of this, sheriff!" shouted a Thompson. "We don't want to hurt you."

"Don't be foolish, Ben," Whitney replied.

"You tell that to Sterling!" said Ben, and he shook a fist toward the saloon door, adding a string of profanities for Sterling's benefit.

Whitney went into the saloon.

Several people from the interior of the store crowded its doorway, craning over Earp's shoulder, trying for a good view of the excitement without exposing themselves to danger. Holland pointed to them one by one, relishing their names as if they were fine wines. "Stacey. Anderson. McDonald. And there's Beebe himself in the apron."

Alison leaned forward, elbows coming to rest among the telltales, fingers interlacing beneath her chin. "Logan's the young one, the one who brought the news?"

Holland nodded. "Jimmy Logan. Blacksmith's son. Hangs around the saloons too much for his father's taste."

She smiled. "You've really done your homework."

"I know every one of them," he replied. "I know every man, woman, and child who impinged on Wyatt Earp's life."

"Must be quite a crowd," murmured Alison.

"Ah—he's coming back now."

Whitney strode down the sidewalk like a man very sure of himself. At Beebe's he waved as if clearing the air

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of flies. "You can all go about your business; there won't be any gunplay out here today. Sterling's gone out the back way, gone clear out of town."

"I didn't take Sterling for a coward," said young Logan.

The sheriff shook his head. "It wasn't his idea. He was ready to come out shooting, but he had some friends with better sense, and they wouldn't let him. Now everything is just fine, nothing to worry about. I'm going to treat the Thompson boys to a couple of drinks at Brennan's, and that'll be the end of it."

With some muttering, those who had been Beebe's customers drifted back inside while Whitney approached the Thompsons with his offer. Up and down the street, the rest of the audience melted away, too. Earp settled back into his chair, and Jimmy Logan leaned against the wall beside him.

"They've got this town treed good," said Logan. He was looking toward Brennan's.

Earp gazed out into the street. "Why'd you go for the sheriff? I hear he's not much use with a gun. Marshal, now—he's a man with a reputation."

"I knew the sheriff would be in his store. It was close-by."

Earp shook his head. "A man should be a full-time peace officer, not half merchant and half sheriff. Job's too hard in a town like this any other way."

"You're sure right about that."

They lapsed into silence, each surveying the street in his own way. As the minutes passed, I found myself restless. Alison's shift had only about an hour to go, and I began to wonder if anything significant would happen in that time. Holland, however, seemed to find every swirl of dust in that scorching summer day fascinating. He had one elbow balanced on the edge of the console now, fist tight against his mouth; the outside of that hand almost brushed the insubstantial edge of the Bubble. He looked like he wanted to reach out and touch Earp. I thought he might be the kind that would try to enter the Bubble space to get closer to his subject, in spite of the standard warning. I had worked with one of those once—in his enthusiasm, he kept edging into the Bubble itself and blotting out sections of the scene with the interference generated by his own body. But as the minutes passed, Holland sat, obviously yearning but able to restrain himself.

Alison, too, seemed to have found some sort of fascination in the vision of two men doing nothing; she hadn't moved since speaking to Holland. My own restless shuffling sounded loud in the quiet room, and I was glad when Whitney finally came out of Brennan's, striding noisily.

He turned toward us and crossed the few meters that separated him from Earp and Logan. He stopped, smiling, self-satisfied. "They've calmed down a bit. They're inside with a bunch of Texas men."

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Earp looked up at him. "Did you take their guns away from them?"

"No, they wouldn't stand for that."

Before Earp could comment further, Bill Thompson stepped out of the saloon, shotgun in his hands. "I'll get me a sheriff if I don't get anyone else!" he shouted.

Whitney turned to face him just as Thompson fired both barrels. At point-blank range, the blast caught the hapless sheriff full in the chest. The sound of the shot, earsplitting in such close quarters, rocked Alison and me back in our chairs; my pulse lurched wildly, while her knee slammed the underside of the console, and she clutched it, growling curses. Holland, evidently expecting the shot, was unruffled.

Whitney had fallen back into Earp's arms. Above the pounding of my heart I heard him gasp, "I'm done. Get me home."

Thompson had run back into the saloon. But there were hundreds of other people in the street now, most of them with drawn guns, and more were gushing from the hotels, the stores, the saloons with every passing moment. At last both Thompsons strode out of Brennan's, guns waving from one side to the other, and walked to the nearest rail where horses were hitched.

"Those are their friends," said Holland, pointing to a group that was gathering in front of the Grand Central Hotel. "Peshaur, Pierce, Kane, Good—"

"All right," said Alison, one hand still massaging her knee. "You don't have to name them all. I just work here."

Holland threw her an injured glance, then sighed. "Sorry. Still, you have to know some of them, for future reference."

"They can't *all* be important."

"That depends on how many times my grant is renewed."

Alison shook her head. "I won't remember most of them. Not from a single session."

"Very well," said Holland. "I'll try to keep to the crucial ones."

The sheriff had friends, too, it turned out, inside Beebe's. They bore his barely breathing body off. Earp and Logan backed into the doorway once more. Within a couple of minutes, a third face peeped out between them.

"Morco," said Holland. "Deputy marshal."

The deputy elbowed Logan aside and peered into the street. The Thompsons were facing the other way, engrossed in their guns.

"Jump out and get them now," Earp said to Morco.

Morco shook his head. "Those fellows across the street might get me."

"You'd get both Thompsons first."

"Not me, friend."

An expression of disgust passed over Earp's face.

Bill Thompson rode out of town, and Ben Thompson covered his retreat by stalking up and down the street

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with half a hundred armed men at his back. One of them fired his gun into the air and crowed, "I'll give a thousand dollars to anybody who'll knock off another lawman!"

Holland chuckled then. "Watch this next piece of frontier bravery. Here comes the mayor." Appearing from our side of the Bubble, the mayor edged along the wall of Beebe's as if magnetized to it. He slid into the doorway, crowding Logan and Earp. "And there's the marshal—that new face just behind Logan. He came in the back way."

"You've really picked the center of the action, Dr. Holland," said Alison.

He hushed her with a sharp gesture, and we spent the next few minutes listening to the mayor try, unsuccessfully, to talk the marshal and his deputy into arresting Ben Thompson. At the end of his tether, the mayor himself shouted at Thompson to lay down his arms and submit to arrest. But the mayor did not dare go out into the street to say that, and Thompson's only answer was some colorful profanity.

Earp had been silent since he suggested that Morco take action. Now he folded his arms across his chest and said to the harried mayor, "Nice police force you've got."

The mayor, whose face was red enough to explode, said, "Who the hell are you?"

Earp shrugged. "Just a looker-on."

"Well, don't talk so goddamned much. You haven't even got a gun."

Earp, wearing dark trousers and a long-sleeved white shirt with soft collar and string tie, looked more like a frontier schoolteacher than a gunfighter. "It's none of my business," he said slowly, "but if it was, I'd get me a gun and arrest Ben Thompson."

"Don't pay any attention to that kid," said the marshal.

The mayor looked the marshal in the face and said, "You're fired, Norton. You, too, Morco." He snatched the marshal's badge from Norton's shirt and turned to Earp. "I'll make this your business," he said. "You're marshal of Ellsworth. Here's your badge. Go into Beebe's and get some guns. I order you to arrest Ben Thompson."

Earp took the badge and went inside.

"Follow him!" said Holland.

Alison's hands moved over the console; the viewpoint swung sideways to center on the doorway and swoop inside past the mayor, past the ex-marshal and his deputy and Logan, their bodies melting away at the edges of the Bubble like mist at sunrise.

The interior of the store was dim compared to the sun-scorched plaza. Without breaking stride, Earp turned to his left, to the firearms counter, where he requested second-hand forty-fives, holsters, and cartridges. Beebe himself hurried over to help with the selection and to watch the new marshal examine the weapons, load them, settle them on hips. Our viewpoint wheeled

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to float above Beebe's shoulder as Earp returned to the door and the store owner followed, then swept on past when the latter stopped with his customers at the threshold. Earp went out to the street alone save for our invisible, unknowable presence.

Fifty meters away, Thompson spotted his new adversary as soon as Earp stepped off the sidewalk. The shotgun muzzle swerved to point toward him as he began to close that gap with a slow, steady gait.

"What do you want, Wyatt?" shouted Thompson.

Until that moment, I had not realized they were acquainted with each other. I wondered how much Thompson knew about Earp, how much there was to know at this early date.

"I want you, Ben," said Earp.

"I'd rather talk than fight," said Thompson. Whatever their relationship, he clearly did not think Earp insane for facing him down in that Ellsworth street.

"I'll get you either way, Ben," said Earp. He kept walking.

"Wait a minute. What do you want me to do?"

"Throw your shotgun into the road, put up your hands, and tell your friends to stay out of this play." He was less than ten meters from Thompson.

Close up, Thompson was ugly, bloated from too much drinking, and powerfully built. He looked belligerent. Earp looked cool. I had to admire him; how many men could appear so calm while facing a loaded shotgun? And then there were all those other half-drunk cowboys in Thompson's entourage, including the one who had offered the reward for the lawman. I began to understand the making of a legend.

"Will you stop and let me talk to you?" shouted Thompson.

Earp halted. He still had not drawn a gun.

"What are you going to do with me?" Thompson asked.

"Kill you or take you to jail."

"Deputy Brown's over there by the depot with a rifle," Thompson said, tilting his head in the appropriate direction. "The minute I give up my guns he'll cut loose at me."

Earp said, "If he does, I'll give you back your guns and we'll shoot it out with him. As long as you're my prisoner, the man that gets you will have to get me."

Thompson hesitated.

"Come on. Throw down your gun or make your fight."

Thompson threw down the gun. "You win." He raised his hands above his head. "I'm all yours."

Now Earp's right hand went to his hip, touched the butt of the weapon there, but still he did not draw. With his left hand he pointed toward Thompson's supporters, swinging his arm wide to encompass them all. "Get back, all of you! Move!"

They moved, and Earp took his

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prisoner's shotgun and gunbelts and marched him through the throng to the courthouse. Some of Thompson's friends attempted to storm the court, but Earp drove them out and locked the door.

The arraignment was swift. "What's the charge?" said the judge.

The mayor was there, and the peace officers who had been fired, but now that they were sealed into a room with Thompson—a room surrounded by his supporters, who could be heard shouting through the thin walls—none of them had any suggestions to make.

"How about accessory to murder?" offered Earp.

The judge looked to the mayor. "How about it?"

The mayor frowned, hesitating, and finally said, "Well, your honor, in my opinion, Ben Thompson here could be charged with...disturbing the peace."

"Guilty!" said the judge. "Twenty-five dollar fine."

Thompson grinned and peeled two bills from a roll of greenbacks. He slapped them down before the judge. "Do I get my guns back now?"

"Certainly," said the judge. "You have paid your fine, and the marshal will restore any property he may have taken from you."

As Thompson started to strap a gunbelt on, Earp caught his arm. "Listen to me, Ben," he said. "Court or no court, don't you put those guns on here. You carry them straight to the Grand Central, and don't so much as stop to say hello to anybody on the way. I'll be watching you. Keep moving till you're out of my sight. After that, whatever you do is your own business."

Earp watched Thompson walk into the waiting crowd, which engulfed him and moved en masse toward the hotel. When Thompson was completely lost to sight, he turned to the mayor, plucking the badge from his shirt, unbuckling the gunbelts from his hips. "I don't need these any more," he said.

The mayor stared at him, his hands receiving the items like coat hooks. "Don't you want to be marshal of Ellsworth?"

"I do not."

"We'll pay you a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month."

Earp looked him in the eye. "Ellsworth figures lawmen at twenty-five dollars a head. That's too cheap for me." He turned and walked out of the courthouse, down the street which no longer swarmed with armed men. We followed him for some minutes, but he only went into a hotel—not the Grand Central—for some dinner. He was just being served his steak when Holland's time ran out.

Alison hit the finish button, and the Bubble collapsed into itself like a deflating balloon, dwindling to a spot of light before winking out. Without it, the room beyond the console was bare and lonely.

"All right," said Alison, swiveling

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her chair to face Holland. "I'm impressed."

"He was quite a man," said Holland. "Now, where do I get the tape?"

"At the records office. Down the hall to your left."

He rose from his chair and offered her his hand. "Thank you very much for all your efforts. I'm very grateful that the company assigned me one of its best operators."

She smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes." He hurried out, obviously eager to lay his hands on the tape and live the whole experience again.

Alison turned to me, still smiling, and shook her head. "Sometimes I think the ones who just sit there with their mouths shut the whole time are the best clients of all, even if they don't offer any cues."

I laughed as I reached out for her. "He's in love with his subject matter." I pulled her onto my lap. "Almost as much as I'm in love with you."

She slid her arms around my neck and touched my forehead with her lips. "Don't we have a 1900 dinner reservation?" she murmured.

"Uh-huh." She was warm, and soft in all the right places. I could have sat there for an hour, just holding her.

"And Myra's due on shift in about five minutes."

I gave her a last squeeze. "You must be hungry."

"Dying," she said. "Nothing like a little simulated fresh air to give a person an appetite."

"It was just the look of that huge steak, I know. They don't make them like that any more. Or at least they don't serve them like that."

"And a good thing, too," she said, extricating herself from my embrace. "That was grass-fed beef, and I'm sure it tasted terrible by modern standards. Let's go get our dinner."

We passed Myra on the way out; she was one of the two other operators who used Alison's Bubble. She had a sour-faced old woman in tow — a woman I had seen so often that I was beginning to wonder when her grant would run out. She was studying the Plains Indians, and I was sure she must have enough information to write a dozen books by now. Hers was one of the longest ongoing projects in the Kansas City Center, and Myra had been complaining lately that the whole thing was starting to bore her. I had never had that experience myself. All of my assignments had been fascinating; perhaps that was the luck of the draw or just a reflection of my attitude toward time viewing. Time viewing, after all, had given me everything I wanted—the endlessly marvelous past, a fat salary, and Alison.

She and I had been living together for about a year just then, sharing an apartment in one of Kansas City's plushest high-rises. The place suited us well—it was full of creature comforts, of deep-cushioned chairs and thick car-

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peting, and of the personal things of our lives, the music we loved and the souvenirs of our work. We stayed there during most of our free time, relaxing together, content with each other's company. We had the money to do anything, go anywhere, but that never mattered. The only thing we ever spent it on was good food; and because neither of us cared much for cooking, we went out for almost every meal.

That evening we visited one of our favorite restaurants. We were dressed plainly compared to the other patrons, wearing our work clothes while other diners wore furs and jewels, but the manager was accustomed to that and did not even raise an eyebrow. His place was frequented by Bubble operators, and that only boosted its reputation.

We ordered wine, lobster, paté. Alison had a weakness for Maine lobster; there were not many places in Kansas City that served it.

"I thought you'd be having steak," I said, "after seeing it in the Bubble."

She shook her head. "The more I thought about it, the less appetizing it seemed. Earp probably ate it every day of his life. He probably never tasted lobster. Why should I limit myself to his menu? I can have steak anyplace. The famous Kansas City Steak."

I had to laugh. "People in New England probably care as little about lobster."

"Ah, yes," she murmured. "One never appreciates what's available at home."

We stopped for a swim after that, in the pool on the fortieth floor of our building. Ordinary people would probably have taken in a show instead, but Bubble operators rarely found the artificial life of either the theatre or the holomovies attractive—they spent their days with the reality of the past, live people instead of actors, and if that moved more slowly than professional entertainment, it was still too similar for the other to be diverting.

We went to bed early, and to sleep somewhat later. Alison seemed distracted while we made love, and quickly tired, but I put that down to an irritating session with a new client; I had had the same experience myself often enough. Clients—invariably Ph.D.s in some variety of history or anthropology—would sit still for a short time, patient at first while the operator worked the Bubble back to the appropriate time period, patient still while the Bubble swept through space to locate the precise spot requested. Only when the process began to drag out did they become restless; only when they began to realize that pinpointing events in time and space was not a simple matter, that it took a practiced and delicate hand and a great deal more patience than they ever thought existed, did they start to show their annoyance. Some clients merely became tense and twitchy as their sessions stretched toward Finish and they saw nothing

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that they were searching for. Others became sarcastic, making snide comments on the ability of the operator. Some became abusive. One client—back in the early days, just after the Jesus Project was finally geared down to ordinary proportions, when we had trained enough operators that a few could be spared for other parts of the world and other projects—actually tried to strangle me for, as he put it, delaying him unconscionably. Fortunately, the intercom to the maintenance office was open as usual, and about ten seconds after I yelled for help, three technicians erupted into the room and pulled him off me. He was gabbling about me wasting his grant money as they dragged him out. The company refunded his grant money and barred him from further use of the Bubble.

Alison had never had quite so bad an experience—I was something of a showpiece among the operators, the guy everyone pointed to when new operators asked if there was anything else to know about handling clients. But she knew her share of petty irritants. No matter how well an operator worked, the clients were hardly ever satisfied. Ultimately, they always thought there was something else they could have seen. And they were probably right. Especially in the cast of tracing historical figures, there was always far more to a person's life than could be viewed in a few hours, even a few hundred hours, in the Bubble.

Alison had been an operator almost as long as I, though I had known her only two years when we moved in together. She had come out of the Paris office, one of the earliest set up after the experimental Bubble in Los Angeles and the first commercial office in Istanbul. She had been kept busy with the Romans and the Vikings there until the Kansas City office opened and needed some experienced operators. When that finally happened, there was considerable maneuvering among the company staff, mostly people trying to avoid the Kansas City assignment; they pleaded that it was an out-of-the way place without much intrinsic interest, not like Istanbul, Paris, or even Los Angeles. But it was a good central location as long as the Bubble was limited in range to about 1500 kilometers—superior to Chicago, which would have pleased some operators better as a base. The result of all the maneuvering was that only the operators with the most interest in the job itself went to Kansas City, those who got pleasure from time viewing almost to the exclusion of outside concerns. We prided ourselves on being the best, the cream. Alison, Myra, and I, and half a dozen others.

There was no lack of work for us, certainly. Pre-Columbian culture studies swept up most of the viewing slots at first, though Vanderbilt University did put in a big, successful bid for the Civil War period as soon as the office was announced. Having a rela-

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tively small grant, Holland had been forced to wait a long time for his opportunity to study Wyatt Earp.

On the day after I watched Alison's first session with Holland, the holos appeared in our apartment. It was a common practice among operators to surround themselves with pictures of the current assignment—people, genre scenes, anything typical of the period, anything attractive to the eye. We kept in the mood of the assignment that way, kept our minds working on it even in off-duty hours. In some ways, we were never off duty, because there were always calculations to be made, procedures to be planned, suggestions to be formulated. Few of the scholars who used the Bubble understood its techniques or its limitations, nor did they often even know exactly what they wanted from it. Part of the Bubble operator's job was to show them what could be discovered with the device. Too many users wanted to know *why* things happened in addition to the events themselves. And they fumed that they couldn't walk right into the Bubble and ask questions of the people there. "Anthropology without informants" was what one of my clients called it—valuable, of course, but not enough for some researchers. Two clients out of three would moan that they wished the company sold time travel instead of time viewing.

Myself, I was glad enough that it was just viewing. The complexities of actually going to the past made my mind spin every time I considered them. I was happy to sit at the console, safe in the world I understood, guiding people through the museum of the past, where everything was locked away behind the invisible walls of the Bubble, tamper-proof and secure.

Not all of the operators agreed with me, of course. Some of them surrounded themselves with so many holos of the past that their homes seemed to *be* there instead of in the Twenty-first Century. Myra usually turned entire walls of her place into scenes from her current project—for example, endless vistas of the Great Plains, complete with buffalo herds and Indian villages. When we sat in her living room during that period, it was like being camped on the prairie. Other operators were less extreme, like Alison and me, with a few holos from the current project plus a few well-loved shots from previous ones. In my bedroom there was a full-length, life-sized portrait of Augustus Caesar standing in the Forum, just as I had seen him that first time. Alison's room had a dragon-prowed Viking ship, one-quarter size, but still large enough to span an entire wall, and the waves beneath it lapped gently at its wooden sides; she said the motion soothed her when she was thinking.

The day after her first meeting with Holland, she put up holos of the main street of Ellsworth and of Earp, Whitney, Logan, the Thompsons—almost everyone we had seen in the Bub-

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ble, some full body shots, some just faces. She put them in her own room, scattered them on the three walls not occupied by the dragon ship; we had agreed when we moved in together that we would each fill our rooms with whatever we wanted and that the common rooms—living room, dining room, kitchen—would be decorated by consultation. The result of that was that our bedrooms were crowded with memorabilia but the other three rooms held only furniture and drapes and a few music tapes that we both liked.

From the doorway, I looked around her walls. "They mostly seem to need baths," I said.

She nodded, still adjusting placement of the pictures. "Except Earp and Whitney. And Logan, I think—he bathes frequently, but smithing is dirty work. Lots of soot."

I glanced at Whitney's face. "I suppose you won't be seeing much more of the sheriff." I pointed at him.

"Some," she said. "I've seen him die from two viewpoints already. Holland says we'll try at least one more."

"How many times can you watch a man be shot?"

"It's Earp he's interested in, not Whitney. He thinks by watching this scene closely enough, he'll be able to figure out why Earp goes after Thompson in the face of all that opposition." She grinned at me. "He wants to read the man's mind."

"I take it nobody knows why Earp did it."

"There are a couple of books, each with its own interpretation, but Holland says they're both based on interviews with Earp when he was an old man. He suspects eighty-year-old Earp of either embroidery or forgetfulness." She shrugged. "I don't think he knew why he did it. He just did it. He was crazy."

"Wyatt Earp crazy? The greatest legend of the West?" She started to step back to see the effect of her adjustment of the holos, and I eased myself behind her so that she ended up in my arms. I locked my hands over her navel. "What a cruel thing to think," I murmured, nuzzling her neck.

"He has that penetrating look of madness in his eye," she said. She covered my hands with her own. "He has restless eyes, as if he thinks someone might be after him."

I chuckled against her hair. "That's the piercing gaze of the lone scout you're criticizing, you know."

"And he's thin—the nervous type that eats and eats but never gains weight. You saw the meal he ordered."

"He's the calmest person I ever saw. The way he faced that Thompson fellow, with the mob behind him...."

"A suicidal impulse." She ticked items off on her fingers, pressing one after the other against my hand. "Suicide prone. Paranoid. Megalomaniacal."

"Megalomaniacal? How so?"

"No one but a megalomaniac would have thought he could face

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down all those armed men and get out alive."

"That's not consistent with the suicidal part of your diagnosis."

She shrugged. "I'm looking at all the options."

I had to laugh. "Have you discussed any of this with Dr. Holland?"

"No. I don't think he'd want to hear it. Earp is his hero—pure, good, the epitome of courage. Sort of larger than life. And, anyway, why should I offer my theories? He's not paying me for psychiatric services." She turned her head to look at me sidelong. "Besides...an operator should always try to maintain a tranquil relationship with the client."

"You think Dr. Holland would try to do something unpleasant if you told him you thought Earp was insane?"

She pivoted in my embrace and slid her arms up around my neck. "Who knows," she replied. "I don't know how crazy *he* is yet."

"We're all crazy somehow," I said. "Me, for example—I'm crazy about you."

"That's good to know," she whispered.

We spent the rest of that night in her bedroom, surrounded by Ellsworth, Kansas, and its incongruous partner, the Viking ship.

My own project of the period was as routine as any had ever been—the endless trek along the Oregon Trail. There were thousands of stories in those covered wagons, most of which I never saw completed, for they passed beyond range of our equipment at the Snake River in Idaho, just before the last leg of their journey. Still, I thought their history, in a dramatic sense, had been pretty well covered by a multitude of classic movies I had seen as a child. So I didn't much mind it being cut short for me. My client, of course, didn't see things that way, and she would be finishing her research in Los Angeles, where she could view the other end of the Trail.

I had been living with several holos of covered wagons, dusty mules, and poke-bonneted women for some time on the day that Alison installed her new pictures, and it was shortly after that that I decided to get rid of them and bring back some old favorites. I had steeped myself in the period long enough, I thought, that I no longer needed visual inspiration; I just *knew* what to do every day, almost without conscious effort. That was a common experience among operators during extended projects.

I dumped the holos and surrounded Augustus with other successes. There had been failures, of course—certain historical figures who could not be found no matter what I tried, leading me to believe that either they were entirely mythical or that my clients' literary researches were less than perfect—but there were few operators who liked to keep records of *that* sort. Nothing was more frustrating, and more ulcer-making, than searching time and space

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for someone or something that wasn't there.

The central office had those records, of course—and the failures would go before the upper echelons of the company during the semiannual employee evaluation. So far, though, no operator had ever been fired for lack of success. There were just too few of us to go around, and training was, at that time, too long and expensive a procedure to waste on anyone without considerable potential. The bad risks were weeded out early, and most operators had a strong sense of having found their life's work. I know I did.

Not long after I got rid of my Oregon Trail holos, Alison added to her Earp collection. She and Holland had moved on to Wichita, and a new set of faces replaced the citizens of Ellsworth. Earp was more mature, I saw, but gaunt as ever, and I thought there were five pictures of him on the wall until Alison explained that two were of his brothers Morgan and Virgil. Only someone who had seen them often, alive, in motion, could have told them apart.

I also recognized another face, though at first I couldn't place it.

"Jimmy Logan, the blacksmith's boy, remember?" said Alison. "He followed Earp to Witchita. Hero-worship, I think. Wants to be his deputy, but Earp says he's too young."

Logan looked older than before, had gained some weight, just enough to give him a mature physique. But he still had a boy's face, and I could see why Earp had said what he did.

"One less new name to memorize," Alison said, crossing her arms over her breasts. "Sometimes I suspect Holland can't possibly have any living friends—his mind can't have room for their names."

I had to smile at her. "Maybe he has holos of his living friends on his walls, just to remind him of them."

She laughed.

With the lights low, we couldn't see all those eyes looking down at us. When I was new at time viewing, that had made me feel strange—dead people watching my sleep. Now, it was nothing, and I slept well beneath them, perhaps better than if the walls had been bare. There was a kind of childish security in knowing that the shadows in the room held only familiar things. I even dreamed about my holos, night spent as my days were, perhaps even a touch more vividly. In my dreams I was often inside the Bubble instead of sitting at the console. Alison would smile when I told her that. She said she didn't dream about that sort of thing at all.

About a week after she and Holland began work on Wichita, the Viking ship vanished from the fourth wall, replaced by more shots of people. Alison's room was crowded with pictures now, every available centimeter, a kaleidoscope of pictures. She made no attempt at pattern, or at any illusion of reality; they were just scattered

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randomly, like a crowd pressing close to the bed. Her room had become a scrapbook.

Then she started spending her independent time in the period.

Most operators ran uninterrupted six-hour shifts, each trio assigned to a console arranging its own flexible schedule. The remaining time was, theoretically, reserved for maintenance, but in practice the machines rarely needed more than brief routine servicing. That left a couple of extra hours per day on each console. The company could have sold that time, of course, no matter how inconveniently placed the slots were, but early in its history it established a different policy: operators were required to sign up for those odd hours, every operator taking at least one of those slots every week, to practice search techniques. In the Kansas City Center, at least, no one had to be told to take a turn in independent study, and we all had pet private projects going that were important only to us. The company oversaw it all but generally looked the other way when an operator used independent time to make certain kinds of profit in the outside world. More than one operator had earned a minor scholarly reputation on independent work; even I had published a paper on the Indian Wars. Others just played at their consoles, watching famous sporting events or entertainments of the past. In the Paris office, according to Alison, the most popular independent study was viewing the great Elizabethan plays as they had been originally performed, with Shakespeare himself sometimes appearing onstage. Some of us would have liked to view more recent events, the great baseball and football games, and the Olympics of the middle and late Twentieth Century—but the Bubble failed us there. The 93.675 years immediately before our own were closed to the Bubble, too near for focus. That was an explanation the Company had to give out tiresomely often, especially to the various governments of the world, which wanted to spy on each other from the vantage of yesterday.

I really didn't mind the loss of ninety-three-odd years. Like most operators, I was fascinated by the remote past, by the worlds that were so different from the one that had encompassed my life before I discovered the company. There was no single period that drew me; I moved from one to another as whim took me—which was typical. Ordinarily, an operator chose an area of independent study because of something he had seen during his regular work, something at a tangent to the client's desires but intriguing to the operator.

As Alison had chosen the period of Earp.

I became aware of her new interest when she signed a tape out of records and brought it home to project in her room. Projection required that she move a wall of holos, and for that she

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requested my help. I thought it was amusing that we didn't stack the holos but moved them to the ceiling, where she could see them from the bed. I had always thought of the ceiling as sacred blank territory, but Alison didn't want to discard any of the pictures. She asked me if I wanted to view the tape, knowing that I would demur. I rarely viewed tapes myself, only when necessary for the job, because their reality was so much less than that in the Bubble; they were not two-dimensional, but they seemed flat to me, and dead as the past really was. I left her there, propped on a mound of pillows on the bed, and I went out to the living room to listen to a little music.

She didn't come out that evening and didn't invite me in. I never knew when she stopped viewing the tape. Rather than disturb her, I went to bed in my own room, alone. We had an agreement about that, too—we respected each other's privacy.

She brought another tape home the following evening. And the one after that. She said they related to Holland's investigations, that she was doing extra preparation for some difficult searches. Alison had always been diligent that way. She came back to my bed on the fourth night, and I was certainly glad to welcome her; I decided that she was working just a little too hard on Dr. Holland's project—a little too hard for my taste. But I didn't say anything. It was her job, she loved it, and this project wouldn't last forever. Holland's grant had to run out someday.

So for a time I didn't see much of Alison, though we shared the apartment and similar work schedules. But when I did see her, it was wonderful, fresh, as if we had just discovered each other, as if she were trying to make up for having so little time for me. There was an extra measure of passion in her lovemaking, and of unpredictability, for I would never know when she was going to creep into my bed in the middle of the night—after staying up that long—and wake me in the best possible way. It was fresh, and frustrating, and a little silly, and at last I tired of it and found myself looking forward impatiently to a return to the old, settled relationship.

But I saw less and less of her, and what I did see began to be moody and morose, as if there were something nagging at her. I thought I recognized those symptoms—the signs of a project going sour, the goals not realized, seeming farther and farther away every day, or completely unrealizable. Better, I decided, not to discuss that possibility with her; I knew how oppressive such discussions could be. I saw Holland a couple of times in the corridors of the company building, and he seemed buoyant. He hardly noticed me, probably didn't recall me from that first day. The contrast between his and Alison's attitudes didn't seem odd to me; often the operator was the first to suspect that something

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was going bad, while the client was still wrapped up in evaluating earlier achievements.

Then her wardrobe changed.

Alison had never been much interested in clothes. Normally she wore jeans and a tee shirt and sneakers just this side of worn out. Now she traded the jeans for dark slacks, the tee shirt for man-cut long-sleeved white, the sneakers for boots. It was an unfamiliar style, not particularly attractive, except that Alison was wearing it. She never needed beautiful clothes in order to look beautiful. I didn't care that she wore something different. Except that it was...different. The change in wardrobe seemed to betoken some other change in her. She was...brisker, somehow. With me, at least. She didn't seem to have any time at all these days. There was pressure on her, of Holland's making or her own, I couldn't be sure which. Perhaps, I thought, his grant was running out and he was transmitting the pressure he was feeling to her. I found myself hoping that his grant would run out *very* soon.

Then she stayed away from our apartment all night.

It had happened before, always work. There was no reason for me to think it was anything else this time. When I saw her the next day, she didn't talk about it. She was in too much of a rush.

I hadn't wanted to believe it, but I couldn't resist the feeling that something was coming between us. The way Holland looked at me in the corridor, that look of complete disinterest... could it have been him? The new wardrobe nagged at my mind. Holland didn't dress that way, of course; he was just a typical, somewhat conservative academic type, subdued colors and patterns, his clothing ten or fifteen years behind the current fashions in their cut. But Earp dressed that way, and other men of the period—Sunday clothes, they called them, clothes of the leisure time. Alison wouldn't wear a hoop skirt and a poke bonnet, of course, but she might immerse herself in the masculine fashions of the day to be more in harmony with Holland's fascination.

I told myself not to be jealous. Holland was considerably older than Alison and I and, to my eyes, not particularly attractive. I didn't know if he was attached to someone else. But he wasn't a Kansas City resident, and so he would have to leave eventually. If it was Holland indeed, I could weather that. Alison and I had too much going for us for any outsider to pry us apart. I told myself that when she was out a second night, when I had lost track of how many nights it had been since we had made love.

I went shopping for myself. I figured that two could play this game, and so I bought myself a pair of dark slacks and some boots and a soft white shirt of the proper style. I even bought a string tie and did it up the way Earp

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did his. And then I checked at records to see when Alison was scheduled for her next independent stint; I was going to surprise her with my new outfit and see if I could get a laugh out of her. We had always laughed together, before Holland.

Records revealed that she had been spending an unusual amount of time in independent work. She had traded with the other operators assigned to her console, amassed a considerable number of extra hours, and spent them all viewing the period between 1873 and 1885. She had also signed out tapes of everything she had viewed independently and had claimed a projection room for replaying them. There were no records of how often she had used the projection room, just that she had access to it full-time. I thought about those rooms, with their wide, plush couches—perfect for meeting... close friends. I wondered if she had viewed any of the tapes in that room, or if she had done something else entirely there.

I had always been honest with Alison. I had thought she would be honest with me. I was sure there was something wrong now between us. And I wanted to bridge the gap before it became too wide. I didn't want to lose Alison. I didn't think I had done anything that would cause her to stop loving me. But maybe I hadn't done enough to keep her wanting to love me. All I could think of was Holland. What did he have to offer that was better? How could he possibly love her more than I did? He hardly knew her.

I went to the door of her projection room when she should have been there. It was locked. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to ring the call bell. It wouldn't have been fair to disturb whatever she was doing in there. I stood by the door awhile, hoping she would come out on her own, hoping *someone* would come out, but at last I gave up. I told myself I was too hungry to wait for her. But when I got to the restaurant, everything on the menu looked like dust; I could hardly choke down the light salad that was all I ordered.

Finally, she changed shifts.

We had always arranged our shifts to more or less coincide, since the first day we decided to live together. No—before that, back when we first realized that we had something special. Each of us had settled into an arrangement with the other two operators of our consoles, and except for a few brief, temporary readjustments, everyone had been satisfied. Now I found a note taped to my bedroom door:

MYRA IS ON A NEW PROJECT AND HAS ASKED ME TO SWITCH SHIFTS WITH HER FOR THE DURATION.

LOVE, ALISON

I stared at the word LOVE. In spite of its presence, the note felt cold and impersonal. In other days, she would have told me herself, in bed, in an apologetic tone. She and Myra were very close, they did each other favors

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often. Myra always had a good reason for asking Alison to take her shift. It never lasted long. But... for the duration?

Because Alison obviously didn't want to discuss the matter with me in person, I called Myra—she was at home at the same times I was now, while Alison was not.

"You can't imagine how glad I was to get rid of that old prune!" she said almost as soon as I could say hello. "She's taking a vacation, and with any luck, I won't be available when she comes back, and she'll have to drive another operator crazy!"

"Yes," I said. "I'd heard from Alison that you had a new project. Some problem with the scheduling, wasn't there? Was it a local academic with a teaching conflict?"

Myra's expression was puzzled. "No, just the usual out-of-towner. From Dallas this time. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was wondering...why you switched shifts with Alison."

She frowned a little. "Why, that was Alison's idea. She did it to stay in synch with you, didn't she?"

"I haven't changed."

"No?"

"No."

Her eyebrows rose slowly. "Are you and Alison...having problems?"

I said, "I don't know. How long is your new project going to last?"

"Awhile. A few weeks maybe. It doesn't look like anything monumental. Maybe she just wants a change. A vacation."

"From me?"

"Well, any relationship can get...." She shrugged. "Claustrophobic." She leaned forward. "Is she talking about moving out?"

"She isn't talking at all. I haven't seen her in days."

"Maybe you should leave her alone for a while. Let her work through whatever it is that's bothering her."

"I don't think I have a choice on that. We may be living in the same apartment, but we don't seem to be living in the same world any more."

"Oh, Barry...I'm sorry." She spread her hands in helplessness. "Maybe it's just the job. She's been looking tired lately. Maybe she just doesn't have the energy left for her private life. After her current project is over, you two should take a long vacation, get away from the company, from the Bubble, from the pressure. Just the two of you."

"If it's still the two of us by then."

"Take it easy, Barry. Maybe it will all blow over, whatever it is."

I tried to smile at her, but my lips felt very stiff. "I hope so," I said. "Thanks, Myra. See you tomorrow." I broke the connection, and her face vanished from the viewscreen, but I couldn't get her expression of sympathy out of my mind. How did I look to her, I wondered, that provoked that expression? I went to the bathroom mirror and stared at myself for a while.

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I hadn't examined my own face so carefully in a long time; in the morning when I got ready for work, it was all business—the hair, the comb, the chin, the depilator. I never looked at my eyes. Now I saw they were bloodshot, as if I hadn't slept well in a long time. For the rest, it could have been misery or anger; I felt them both lapping over me, fighting with each other for supremacy. I wanted to break the mirror.

The apartment felt so empty with Alison gone. So cold. I stood before her door, that blank, familiar territory. We respected each other's privacy; I knew it would not be locked; I knew Alison would never have dreamed that I might go in without her permission. I touched the smooth panel with the flat of my hand. What did I expect to find? The walls covered with pictures of Holland? Or everything packed up, ready to be removed, a trunk standing in the middle of the floor? Or...nothing—an empty room, already divested of all the individuality that was Alison?

I slid the panel aside.

At first glance, the room appeared to be in its ordinary condition, much as I had seen it last, with holos on three walls and the ceiling, the fourth wall blank for projection. Scenes and people of the Classic West surrounded me, and Alison's bed and belongings were in their usual places. She wasn't moving out, at least. Then something began to nag at me and I turned slowly to take in all the pictures, to look at what they were, not just at the whole kaleidoscopic effect.

There was only one man on the walls of that room. In a hundred different poses, a hundred different sets of clothing, full body shots and portraits, profiles and frontal views, with mustache and clean-shaven, at a dozen different ages, but still, unmistakably, the same man. I knew him, I was sure of that, but it took me a few moments to place him. For me, he would never have stood out from a crowd, but I had seen him in the Bubble and I had seen him before on that wall. His name came at last—Jimmy Logan, the blacksmith's boy, the one who hero-worshipped Wyatt Earp. In one of the holos, a full-length shot, life-sized, he appeared to be about thirty years old, and he wore a marshal's star on his long-sleeved white shirt.

I sat down on the bed. In my periods of greatest devotion to Augustus Caesar, I had never been so immersed in him. It was overwhelming, stifling, claustrophobic. I lay back, and there he was on the ceiling, inescapable; he had his shirt off in the most central shot, hot sun pouring down on him, and the beads of sweat on his shoulders and chest glistened, giving him the appearance of being covered with oil. I rolled over, burying my face in her pillow to escape him. The pillow smelled faintly of her shampoo, and I wondered when the last time was that she had slept there. A glass half-full of water sat on the bedside table, the in-

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side surface of the lower part covered with bubbles. Stale. Was it yesterday that she had drunk from that glass, or last week?

Behind the glass was a stack of tapes, coded with the company's emblem. The recording dates were all recent. These, I thought, were what she had been spending some of her spare time with. I dimmed the overhead light and slipped one into her projector.

A dusty street materialized upon the blank wall. The sun was low, shadows long, few people walking anywhere in sight. The street looked vaguely familiar; it might have been Ellsworth, or any one of a hundred similar Western cowtowns of the period. I half expected to see Wyatt Earp stride through the field of view. Instead, Jimmy Logan entered it, Logan in his mid-twenties, I judged, walking with a sure stride down the street. The center of town was behind him. He was passing into a more residential sector, an area of clapboard houses surrounded by burnt-out gardens and white picket fences. He stopped to unlatch the gate at one of the houses, to step through it and latch it once more behind him. He hurried up the walk, climbed three steps and pulled the front door open without knocking. I guessed that it was his own house and he had come home for supper.

I swooped in behind him and found that more than supper was waiting inside for him. She was about his age, rather prim-looking in the tradition of the time, hair pulled back in a tight knot, dress high at the neck and long-sleeved, falling to the floor. Still, she was rather pretty and quite nicely built, and she gave him a very warm welcome. When her hand touched the back of his neck, I saw that she wore a wedding ring. They kissed for quite a long time, and the tape went on afterward, following lovingly close as they went into the bedroom and undressed each other and eased to the bed. From their intensity, I supposed that they hadn't been married long. Alison had caught everything, had recorded an excellent piece of erotica. I found myself reacting very strongly to it.

And wondering how she reacted.

I scanned the other tapes at high speed. They were all different, yet all fundamentally alike. Not that they were *all* erotic, not overtly. A few just showed him moving, chopping wood, riding a horse, working in his father's forge. Still, there was an erotic element to them all, a physical element. When I had seen the lot, I had a very fine awareness of his body, of the play of muscles, the style of walk and posture, the little habitual gestures. And I knew I would never again have any trouble recognizing him. If he had been alive, if he had walked into the company's offices, I could have greeted him by name.

And I didn't know who he was.

I knew, of course, that he was

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Logan, but who was Logan? What was his place in history? Why was Alison so fascinated by him?

I put everything back as I had found it, smoothed the bed. When she came home...if she came home, she wouldn't be able to tell I had breached her privacy. I felt guilty about doing it, but glad. Out in the living room, I put in a call to the Encyclopedia Britannica, requested all their information on James Logan of Ellsworth, Kansas, approximate birth year 1853.

They had no listing for him.

He wasn't important, at least not that our contemporary culture knew. I thought that he must be important just to Dr. Frederick Holland.

So I waited until Alison was off shift and called Dr. Holland, taking a chance that he and she would not be together at his place. I was at work by then and didn't know if Alison had gone home. Records gave me Holland's number at the guest house. He was bright, polite, not rushed as if he had company. He didn't seem to recognize my name or face.

"Just some checking on behalf of records, Dr. Holland," I said. "We just want to confirm that some of your time has been devoted to an intensive study of one James Logan."

Holland looked puzzled. "Don't you people know what I'm studying?"

"We have a listing for Wyatt Earp, Dr. Holland, but you seem to have expanded your researches to include this other person."

"Is that wrong? Is that not allowed? I thought the fee covered whatever researches I chose to make."

"It does, Dr. Holland, it does. We only want to keep our records organized for purposes of cross-referencing. Someone else has requested materials on James Logan, and to avoid duplication of effort we would appreciate knowing how much of his life you intend to examine."

Holland shook his head. "Very little," he said. "If someone else is investigating him, they won't profit by *my* studies. Who is it, anyway?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Holland, but we can't give out that information. Would you please tell me approximately how many hours of work you have spent or intend to spend on James Logan? An estimate."

"Well, none on him *per se*. I suppose he's appeared in an hour or two of my viewing so far, but just as a bystander. I don't expect to see him at all in the future."

"Thank you for your time, Dr. Holland. Sorry to have disturbed you."

"Not at all," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't be more help."

I snapped off the connection.

Unless Holland was lying, Logan was Alison's own project. Unless he was lying. Perhaps the lack of recognition was just a sham, and he knew perfectly well that I was Alison's lover. Ex-lover? Still, I had called unexpectedly; he hadn't had time to prepare

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camouflage for his reactions. And the more I saw of him, the less likely he seemed as a reasonable replacement for me. Of course, I couldn't be objective on that. I was rapidly discovering that I couldn't be objective on anything where Alison was concerned.

I had tried calling her during her off-shift, at work, at home. Her line had a block on my personal code; she wasn't accepting my calls. It seemed absurd—we lived together, but I didn't see her, couldn't talk to her. Part of that was my own doing, and I decided the time had come to ring at the door of her projection room, even if it meant disturbing her privacy.

I traded shifts with one of my co-workers, putting myself back in synch with Alison. Now I had time to spend in trying to touch her. It took me quite a while to get up the courage to ring. I kept telling myself that the truth couldn't possibly be worse than what I imagined.

I rang.

At first there was no answer, and I thought perhaps she wasn't inside. Like every room of the building, it was totally soundproofed. So I couldn't tell if it was occupied by pressing my ear against the panel, though I did that anyway. I rang again. And as I waited, while the occasional company personnel passed by and looked at me curiously, I began to think that she was inside all right, watching erotic tapes with Holland. I hadn't bothered to check on him. And then I didn't care. I rang again, a long, long ring, my finger pressed against the call button until the nail reddened.

The door opened.

Alison wore her new clothes, or perhaps they were her only clothes now. The soft white shirt, the dark trousers, the boots made her look like someone else, someone I didn't know. She wore her hair tied back now, too, with a thin ribbon, not loose about her shoulders any more.

"Oh," she said. "Hello." She leaned against the door, as if to block my way inside and my view of it.

"May I come in?"

"Why?" she said.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you too much."

"Some," she said.

"I'd like to talk to you. Please. If not now...then maybe I can make an appointment?" I tried to smile at that suggestion, but my mouth didn't want to cooperate.

She sighed heavily. "All right. Come in." She stood aside, holding the door with both hands, like a shield.

There was no one else in the room. It was a very bare little room, with minimum comforts. A thick rug. A couch in the center of the floor. A four-way projector, for displaying tapes on all the walls simultaneously. Alison walked to one end of the couch and stood there, waiting for me.

"Sit down," she said.

I sat, but she remained standing, I thought so that she could go back to

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the door any time she wanted and hold it open for my exit.

"Well?" she said.

I tried to smile again, but the effort was too much for me. I patted the cushion beside me. "Come here?"

She shook her head. "I don't have time for a long discussion."

I said, "Alison, what's wrong?"

"I'm just busy."

I leaned toward her. "You know what I mean. What's wrong with us? What's happened?"

She half turned away, looked down at the carpet. "Let it go, Barry. I don't want to talk about it."

"Let it go?" I stood up, took a step and reached for her, but she backed off, just beyond my grasp. "Alison, I love you."

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Let's not play tag, Barry. Just leave me alone."

"Have you...changed your feelings about me?" The words caught in my throat, and I thought for a moment that they would choke me. Then I realized that the sensation was tears held back. I didn't want to cry in front of her; my pride wouldn't allow that.

"Do you want me to move out?" she said.

"No!"

"I don't want to. It's a lot of trouble." She spoke so casually, so effortlessly, while for me every word was like pulling knives from my belly.

"Alison," I began.

She walked over to the door and opened it for me, as I had known she would. "You'd better go. I'm very busy."

I couldn't move for a moment. Watching her walk—no, *stride* was the word to describe it—jarred me. Clothes, manner, even walk, this was a new Alison indeed. She didn't even stand the way she used to. Her step was longer now, harder, though maybe that was a result of the hard high heels on those boots, like the boots that Earp and Logan and Whitney had worn, the boots that hammered so hard on wooden sidewalks. She walked like the men of Ellsworth, Kansas, those men whose natural habitat included dusty, unpaved streets and wide prairie pounded flat by the hooves of buffalo. And she stood as they did, legs wide, hips canted as if a pair of forty-fives rode on them.

Standing by the couch, I felt as though time itself had come between us, as if some strange avatar of a man dead a century had come out of the Bubble to stand in Alison's place. I sagged. I, a mere mortal of the Twenty-first Century—what did I have in common with this creature from the past? I shook my head sharply. No, I told myself, this was just Alison, no matter how deeply she had immersed herself in vanished days. Perhaps, I thought, too deeply. I glanced sidelong at the projector, at the tapes racked in its holders. Four were in playing position; Alison had probably been running them one at a time, but I had only to

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touch a button to show them all simultaneously. A serious breach of operator etiquette.

"What's been keeping you so busy?" I asked softly, and my finger stabbed the button.

"No!" shouted Alison.

But it was too late. I saw what she had been seeing until she opened the door for me.

Four walls of Logan was too much for me. My head spun.

Logan in the dusty street, star on his chest, facing down a waiting gunman, tension evident in his straining stance. Logan with chest bared and running sweat in his father's forge, muscles glistening with the ruddy light of the coals. Logan making love to his wife in the bed I had seen once before. Logan by a brook, lying on green grass, obviously far from Ellsworth, and with him someone other than his wife, laughing, holding her arms out to him.

Alison reached the projector then and punched the OFF button. "Get out," she said, her face white with anger, her eyes hard. But she was so close as we both stood by the projector that I couldn't help encircling her with my arms, pressing her against me. She turned her face away from my kiss and tried to push me away; for a moment I held her tight, my lips against her hair, and at least she smelled like the old Alison. She hadn't changed her shampoo.

She broke free. "Out," she said, her hands making fists at her hips, and I could have sworn that if those forty-fives had been there she would have drawn on me. I had seen that kind of anger before, in the Bubble.

I didn't move. "What's going on, Alison?" I whispered. "What are you doing in here? Making tapes for public consumption? Or maybe just...for private?"

"What I do in here is none of your business."

I shook my head slowly. "What have I done, Alison? We used to confide in each other. We used to trust each other. We used to...love each other."

"I don't love you any more," she said. "Now leave me alone."

The words were like bricks dropping on my head, but instead of being beaten down, I felt myself drawing the strength of fury from them. "Who is it then?" I shouted. "Who is it? Holland?"

"No, it isn't Holland. It isn't anyone. Now will you leave before everybody on the floor comes running to see what the shouting's about?" She pointed peremptorily toward the door.

I went to the door, but I kicked it shut instead of going out. "He isn't worth it," I said, turning back to her, my voice a bit more under control. "He'll bore you out of your mind!"

"I told you I'm not interested in Holland," she said. "And I'm not interested in continuing this conversation."

"Who, then?" I demanded. "Who are you making these tapes for? Who

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are you going to enjoy these choice bits of erotica with? Is it someone I know?"

"It isn't anyone," said Alison. "And even if it were, you have no right to ask who."

"I have the right to know who the competition is. I have a right to know what he's doing for you that I haven't done."

She turned away. "Go home, Barry. It's over, that's all. Since you feel this way, I'll move out as soon as I can find a new place."

"I don't want you to move out, Alison!"

"Well, what *do* you want?"

"I want...to understand." I took a step toward her and held my hands out, pleading. "What have I done wrong?"

She sighed. "Nothing, Barry. Nothing at all. I'm just...not interested any more. You're going to have to accept that."

"Then what are you interested in?" I looked at the projector. "This? Watching dead people make love? When you can have someone live and warm?"

"I'd rather not discuss it."

"What kind of replacement is that for me? Am I so...repulsive?"

"You're not repulsive, Barry."

I eased up behind her, touched her shoulders tentatively. "I've changed my schedule, Alison; we're back in synch. Why don't we go out for dinner and then home? Or whatever you want. I'll do whatever you want. Anything." I squeezed her shoulders with stiff fingers, trying to be gentle, knowing that I was too tense to be so. "Come home, darling. Please come home."

She shook her head.

"I'll wait for you, till you're finished with whatever it is that you're doing. You can't stay here around the clock. You've got to eat, to sleep. It's all so much more pleasant with a warm body nearby. I won't even talk if you don't want me to."

Again, she shook her head.

"Alison, please."

"Barry," she said quietly, "I would rather stay here with him than go anywhere with you."

"With *him*? Who?"

"Jim Logan."

I glanced at the projector. "You'd rather watch a dead man than spend any time with me."

"Please don't take it as an insult."

"No?" I swung her around to face me. "How else can I take it?"

"He's fresh, Barry. He's different. He fascinates me."

"I can see that."

"I can watch him for hours. He's struggling to move from one world to another. His father wants him to be a blacksmith, but he wants to be a peace officer. He has a very strong sense of right and wrong. And courage. Barry, I've never seen such courage."

"And his body isn't bad, either," I said. "Which do you watch more—the body or the courage?"

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She shook her head. "You don't understand. He fulfills my highest expectations. I couldn't expect more from a human being than I see in him."

"There was Earp."

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Earp wasn't the wonderful person legend would have him."

"And this guy is wonderful. It just makes you go all warm inside to watch him be so terrific."

She pushed away from me. "I knew I couldn't discuss it with you."

I stared at her for a long moment. At last I said, "Alison, do you have a crush on this guy?"

She stared back at me, her lips a thin, white line. "Don't be silly," she said.

I looked her up and down, slowly, and everything I had seen and heard since she opened the door began to make a sort of bizarre sense to me. "I don't think I'm being silly," I said. "I think you're acting like a teenager in love with an entertainment idol. Only this...this one isn't even accessible through the stage door. You'll never touch him, Alison. You'll never even get close enough to find out if he has bad breath."

"That's nonsense."

"Then tell me who's really taking up your time. Tell me that I'm wrong, that it's a live person edging me out. I'd rather believe that, Alison."

"Barry, you're wrong on both counts. Look—you have your hobbies, your favorite historical people. I remember very clearly all those stories you used to tell about Augustus. I didn't accuse you of having a crush on him."

"This is different! I didn't trade time with my fellow operators to spend all my waking hours following his life. I didn't tape his orgies for later replay. I didn't wear a toga."

"So I traded a few hours; so what?" Her brows knit. "You've been checking up on me."

I nodded. "I'm fascinated by *you*, Alison."

"I don't think I care for that level of curiosity."

"I missed you. I was jealous. Isn't it understandable?"

She strode to the projector, pulled out one of the four tapes and inserted a replacement from the stack in one of the holders. She hit the ON button, and Logan flashed onto one of the walls, life-sized, standing spraddle-legged on the empty prairie, one hand raised before him holding a gun. He was shooting slow and steady at something—a target, I guessed, beyond the edge of the picture. He wore no hat, and a sharp wind ruffled his hair, his shirt collar. He made a striking figure against the endless expanse of prairie and cloudless sky.

"All right," said Alison, not looking at me but at the image on the wall. "There's you competition. Now get out of here. Or I'll call for help and have you thrown out. I signed out this room, and you haven't any right in it

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without my approval."

"Alison," I said. "This is all wrong."

"I'll be out of the apartment as soon as I can manage it."

"You don't have to move. I want you to stay."

"I don't want to stay," she said.

"Alison...he's dead. He's dust."

"Get out!"

I felt my whole body slump, my legs carry me toward the door without any conscious volition on my part. I touched the panel with my fist before opening it. "I love you," I said. "I'll wait this thing out."

"Goodbye."

I closed the door softly behind me, leaned against the wall beside it. Then I just slid down to the floor and sat with my knees up, my head pillowed on my arms, and I wept. I didn't care who saw me. Several people passed in the ensuing minutes, most of them operators I had known for years, and each one of them asked if I needed any help. I did, but none they could give. At last I got tired of hearing their offers and staggered away. I locked myself in a bathroom for a while, and eventually I was empty enough to go home.

Alison moved out three days later. I wasn't home when it happened; she took a day off while I was on shift, and she cleaned her room out so thoroughly that it looked as if no one had ever lived there. When I got home I discovered her bedroom door ajar and went in and stood in the bare room for a time, not thinking anything at all. It was like our relationship had never been. Even the music collection, when I looked through it later to put something on the system, was missing the recordings she had selected. As I sat and listened to one of my own choices —I didn't really know which one—I couldn't help wondering if Holland had been angry at missing a day with the Bubble.

The next afternoon, Myra was sympathetic, everyone was sympathetic, though not all were verbal about it. Everyone knew that Alison had left me. But Myra assured me that she hadn't moved in with anyone else; she had taken a small place near the company building. I guessed that Myra thought she was being kind to me, to tell me that, and I didn't have the heart to explain that I would have been happier the other way, any other way.

I called Alison a couple of times in the following weeks, after Myra gave me her number, but her line was blocked to my code as before. I didn't know what I would say anyway; I just wanted to see her face. I didn't see her at work at all, though she was still there. I wondered briefly if her next step would be to transfer to another office, but then I realized that only in Kansas City could she watch Logan—he was out of range anywhere else. I was assuming, of course, that he spent his whole life in Kansas. After a while I

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thought she might transfer when she had tracked his life to some point where he moved to another base's range. Earp had done it, gone to California eventually, as Holland would have to do if he wanted to follow his quarry all the way.

I realized I didn't know very much about Logan. But Alison's interest in him was mesmeric. I *wanted* to know. I wanted to understand her fixation. So in my independent time I began to study him. If the records people thought it was strange that two operators were spending a lot of time in the same milieu, they never said anything, even when I, like Alison, traded away my future independent time to other operators willing to give up their present allotments.

I can't say I grew fond of him, though his wife was very pretty. The other woman I had seen him with on Alison's tape turned out to be a second wife, acquired after the first one died in childbirth. He was a very moral person, this Logan—never gambled, rarely drank, sent his children to Sunday school. His contemporaries considered him a pillar of the community. He moved back to Ellsworth soon after Earp left Wichita for Dodge, becoming its marshal in 1876. The town was past its days of glory then, but still a rowdy place, and there was plenty of work for a man with a fast gun hand and more courage than I could comprehend. I didn't compare to him there. I had seen a lot of guns pointed in my direction in the Bubble, and my mouth had gone dry at every one of them, though the bullets couldn't touch me; I probably would have fainted at the same sight in reality. Or at best, frozen. I had the wrong reactions to be a frontier gunfighter. I knew she compared me to him and found me lacking. But how well would James Logan function in the Kansas City of the Twenty-First Century, where the skills he had spent so many years honing would be useless? He wouldn't even be able to function as a contemporary law officer now that the police no longer carried guns.

I worked forward through Logan's life, watched his children grow, watched the trees that shaded his white clapboard house rise up and up till the street beneath them was moist with shade instead of dusty in the summer. Ellsworth aged, too, softened, settled down to quiet anonymity. In 1889 he and the family moved west to Colorado, where the town of Lamar needed a marshal. Life was more exciting for him there. He seemed to thrive on excitement, to be restless when things were quiet.

And then he disappeared.

The standard procedure for a quick Bubble survey of the life of a historical figure involved a delicate and almost intuitive use of the device. The operator had to guess where people were going, how long they would be there, when they would return. The operator had to skim through events at

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a speed that made them virtually incomprehensible to the layman, halting the process by some instinct that sensed significance. It took a long time to develop that instinct, but every good operator had it. I established my baselines immediately—the house Logan lived in, the marshal's office. I saw him pass in and out of them like a wraith, almost insubstantial against the long-lasting solidity of the walls and furnishings. I could run through the days of his life in the minutes of my own. Sometimes I lost track of him and had to retrace laboriously—when he escorted a prisoner to the next state, when he took a posse out after stage robbers, whenever he left the town for an extended period of time. Then, the process of following him had to slow enormously, and sometimes I didn't bother, merely returning to the house, trusting that he would come back there eventually and I could take him up again.

I did that this time. I didn't know why he vanished, but I stationed my view in the bedroom, sure that he would return to the room where his wife slept fitfully every night he was away.

He didn't.

After going through a dozen stages of worry, his wife persuaded the mayor to send a search party out for him—which was when I learned that he had gone to check on some rumors of cattle rustling among outlying ranches. I backtracked to the day he left and followed him.

I watched him die.

At that point I had spent months on Logan, and I had had enough. Alison was right about him, completely right. I could see how attractive he was—charming, handsome, with all the qualities that his era valued. And in addition there was that touch of sadness about him, especially after he lost his first wife—just a touch of vulnerability to make the rest all that more endearing. And I was tired of watching such a paragon.

Alison, however, was not. Records showed that her use of the Bubble was still as heavy as ever in the period between 1873 and 1885. She kept returning to certain time segments, replaying them. She could have taped them, of course, probably had, but I could easily understand her desire to see them in the Bubble instead—the near-reality of the Bubble. She was selecting from his life, the high points, the cream. But not after 1885.

Out of curiosity, I tuned in the last 1885 date myself. That turned out to be the day that Logan was shot by a drunken cowboy, shot from behind, from cover—a practice that occurred more often than admirers of the Classic West would have liked to believe. It was not a serious wound by modern standards, but in a world without antibiotics it came close to claiming his life. He was bedridden for a long time, but he recovered well under his wife's diligent care.

She was avoiding the shooting, the

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period of convalescence, the life afterward. Even though that life wasn't very different from the one he had led before. He hadn't let the shooting faze him.

I thought...maybe...he had come too close to death for her taste—his mortality had suddenly become too real. And I thought, too, that maybe now I had a way to pull her away from him and back to me. One last attempt, I told myself, now that she'd had some *time to herself*. I was hoping that, perhaps, she was beginning to get lonely for someone real. She still lived alone, and according to Myra, there was no one in her life. No one, at least, but Holland, whose grant had been renewed because of Alison's excellent work. I hated Holland by that time because he was seeing her, even if in a professional capacity. Holland; unattractive as he looked to me, he was still real and available for whenever she wanted reality. And Alison, even the new strange Alison, must have provoked some kind of reaction in him. Unless he was as fixated on Earp as she was on Logan. It was possible. I no longer knew what to believe, what to scoff at. Even my own clients seemed to have unnatural interests in their subjects. I found myself in a mental prison, and I had to escape somehow, and take Alison with me.

I taped about twenty minutes of James Logan, and with that tape I went to Alison's apartment. She had given up on the projection room after moving out of our place; she didn't need that extreme of privacy any more, didn't have to concern herself with the annoyance of encountering me in the kitchen or living room at home. I knew her door wouldn't respond to my code, though I tried it anyway. And I knew she wasn't there, but she was due soon, her shift having just ended. I waited for her, waited a long time. She must have gone someplace else before coming home, perhaps to dinner. I waited. She arrived at last, alone as I expected, alone for an evening with *him*.

She saw me when she stepped out of the elevator. She stood stock still and stared at me.

"Hello, Alison," I said. "It's been...a long time."

"Whatever you want," she said, "I haven't got it."

I shook my head. "I have something to show you."

"Another time, Barry. Catch me at work." I blocked her way to the door, but she elbowed me aside—harder than necessary—to open it.

"Please let me come in, Alison. It won't take long. Just a few minutes."

"I'm very tired," she said. "I'm going to take a bath and go to bed. I don't want any company." She stepped across the threshold, turned, and started to slide the portal shut in my face.

I leaned into the opening, blocking the door's closure. "Please."

"I don't want to see you, Barry. Now, go away or I'll call the police."

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"Oh, Alison, it can't be *that* bad between us."

She looked at me rather sadly. "I don't know what you expect me to do, Barry. I'm really sorry, but it's all over. Why can't you understand that?"

I said, "Alison, have you changed so much...?"

"These things happen all the time. Look at how many men Myra has run through."

"Myra is Myra, and you're you."

"And you're you, and I've had enough of it. Barry, don't try to recapture something that's gone. Can't we part friends? Can't we just...part?"

I put one hand on the door. "You're not being very friendly, Alison."

"You're being pushy."

"I haven't bothered you lately."

"You've tried to call."

"Why not? I'm still interested."

"And I'm not. So why don't you go home and get a good night's sleep instead of standing in my doorway?"

I pulled the tape out of my pocket, held it up. "I have something to show you. It won't take long."

She sighed, shifted her weight from one leg to the other and put one hand on her hip. "How long? That's a two-hour tape."

"Not full," I said. "maybe fifteen minutes. Twenty at most."

"Of what?"

"You have to see it."

"Why?"

"Because I'll keep bothering you until you do."

"There are ways of dealing with that kind of harassment, Barry."

"Just view the tape. After that...I'll let the next move be up to you."

"It's not going to change my mind. I don't care what it is."

"Afterward...if you still want me to leave, I'll go. I promise."

"You're betting a lot on this tape," she said, eying it suspiciously. "What is it?"

"You can find out right now."

She pursed her lips, then sighed so heavily that her shoulders heaved. She stepped aside. "All right. Come in. But I'm just doing this because you promised. I trust you, Barry—I trust you'll keep that promise. If you don't...."

"I will."

This was Alison's apartment, no compromise with another human being; as soon as I entered, my eyes were assaulted with Logan—Logan on the living room walls, Logan visible through the bedroom door, even in the kitchen. Alison went into the bedroom to fetch the projector, which she placed on a low table beside the living room sofa.

"You sit there," she said, indicating the sofa. She seated herself in a chair some distance away. "You can project over here." She pointed to the wall facing the chair, the only wall with a large blank space.

I nodded, slipped the tape into the slot and flicked the machine on.

I heard her sharply indrawn breath as Logan bloomed into view; he was

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n horseback, riding among rolling ills near a wide river. He was heading estward, and beyond him we could e the lowering sun above mountains urple with distance.

Alison gripped the arms of her hair with white-knuckled fingers. What *is* this?" she demanded.

"You said you'd watch."

She pushed herself deeper into the hair, and I could see the flexion of her w where the teeth were grinding. "All ght," she murmured. "All right."

As Logan topped the next rise, we ere behind him and saw what he aw— a cabin set well back from the ver. A thin plume of smoke drifted om the chimney. Logan rode down o it, tethered his horse at the rail be- ore the front porch, climbed the two teps to the door and knocked loudly. he panel swung open, and he entered, ith us at his back. He was hardly a ace past the threshold when someone ho had been concealed to one side of he aperture struck him over the head ith a club. He fell without a sound nd lay still upon the floor. The two en—the assailant and the one who ad opened the door—picked him up y the shoulders and the heels and car- ied him outside. There, they draped im across his horse, and while one of hem led the animal, the other steadied he unconscious body in the saddle. They walked toward the river.

I watched Alison. She was tense, ut she never spared a glance for me; nce she had begun to concentrate on Logan, she didn't seem to notice anything else. Her eyes were wide, staring, and her expression was stark.

At the riverbank, the two men pulled Logan's limp body from the horse, and between them they hauled it into the stream until the brisk current swirled about their waists. Then they held his head underwater for a long, long time before letting go of him. He sank.

The rest of the tape was disjointed, jumping forward in time, skimming the surface of the river until the body washed ashore, bloated, scarcely recognizable. In fast motion we watched it decompose, watched buzzards pick the carcass, watched the skeleton separate into a scatter of bones as the last ligaments gave way. Dust alternated with snow in covering the remains, and before the tape ended they had disappeared from view.

Alison stood up when it was over, when the wall was blank once more. "Get out," she said in a low, tight voice.

I looked at her for a long moment, looked at the white face and wide eyes, at the fists working convulsively at her sides. "Don't you see? I said softly. "He's dead. He's dust. Before you were born he was dust. If you love a man like that, you might as well be dead yourself."

She reached the projector in two strides, pulled the tape out and dashed it against the floor. "Get out of here!" she shouted.

I tried to pull her into my arms, but

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she struggled. "Alison, you're warm and alive! How can you waste yourself on him?"

She glared up into my face, her fingers curling into my shirt front till the fabric cut into the back of my neck. "Murderer!" she said. "Murderer!" And then she yanked me sideways, and suddenly we were on the floor, rolling over and over, and she was all nails and sharp knees and kicking feet. She went for my eyes, my throat, my groin, but I twisted and freed myself somehow, staggered to my feet. I felt my face bleeding, and the numb places scattered over my body where bruises would rise soon.

"Alison," I gasped, "*time* killed him, not *me!*"

She lay on the floor, her fists striking the rug in a slow, steady beat. "Murderer," she moaned. She turned her head gradually, till her tear-streaked face was visible. Her eyes seemed to look past me, unfocused. "Get out before I kill you." There were no tears in her voice, but there was something that chilled me.

"All right," I said. "I'll go. But I want you to know that I love you. I did this today because I love you. I hope...someday you'll understand that."

She was still beating on the rug when I left.

For three days I nursed my bruises, calling in sick to work. Finally, I had to go in, with a spray bandage covering the gashes on my cheeks. My client was sympathetic when I explained that I had fallen down a flight of stairs. Some of my fellow operators looked at me curiously, but none made any comment; they were much too engrossed in a more vital topic of conversation: Dr. Frederick Holland. As I came off shift, word of his complaints was buzzing through records. A crowd of workers was gathered about the counter there, discussing him. Myra, who was due on shift in a couple of minutes, took me aside as soon as she saw me.

"Maybe you could sub for her, Barry—double shift until she comes back. You must know more about his project than anybody else here. He's furious, threatening to sue, and the front office is giving us all a hard time."

"Threatening to sue? What's going on?"

"It's Alison. She's gone. She hasn't come in to work for three days, and nobody knows where she is or when she'll be back."

"She didn't call in?"

"She didn't *anything*. Her line rings forever, nobody answers the door, and her mail is piling up."

I clutched at her arms. "Maybe something's wrong! Have you called the police?"

"The police?" She frowned. "You think it might be that bad?"

I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what crazy ideas could have gone through Alison's mind after I left that day. "You'd better call them.

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They'll have to break in. I'll wait for them there. You want to come with me?"

"I can't. I'm on duty."

"Isn't this more important? She's your friend."

"You'll be there," she said. "What good will two of us do?"

"I don't know. I don't know." I let go of her. "I'll let you know what we find out." I started for the door at a run.

She called after me, "Will you take her shift?"

"Ask me later!"

She started to say something else, but the door cut her voice off as it slid shut behind me.

The police took their time. I paced the corridor outside her apartment for what seemed like hours before they finally arrived. They waved a warrant at me when I began babbling about the delay—"You don't get these things in five minutes, you know," they said. Then they asked for my company ID, to prove that I really was one of her co-workers, that I had some legitimate business witnessing the procedure. They asked me a lot of questions, too, and found out that she and I were former lovers and had had an argument three days before. One of them stood very close to me after that, while his partner rang the bell for a long time before unscrambling the lock.

We went inside. The apartment was just as I remembered it. The police did not seem to pay much attention to the pictures of Logan everywhere. They searched very thoroughly—rooms, closets, even under the bed. When they started on the bureau drawers and the kitchen cabinets, I began to wonder if they expected to find pieces of Alison hidden everywhere. But they found nothing—no blood, no sign of a struggle, and no Alison.

They were obviously disgusted, with the search and with me.

"Maybe she just went home to her mother," one of them suggested.

"She's an orphan," I said.

"Well, maybe she has a favorite aunt." They ushered me out and relocked the door. "People have been known to leave home for a few days, you know, even without telling anybody where they were going. Maybe she just wanted to get away. Maybe from you. You work together, don't you?"

I shook my head. "Just in the same building. We don't see each other much any more."

"Okay, maybe she just wanted to get out of that building, even out of the town. A little vacation. Why don't you wait a few more days—she'll probably turn up." He looked at me hard then. "But don't go anywhere we can't find you easily until she comes back, hmm?"

"I didn't do anything to her," I said.

"Looks like she did something to you."

I nodded. "It was a bad argument.

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Short, but bad. When I left she was very upset. She could have done... anything."

"For example?"

I clenched my teeth. "Suicide?"

The officers looked at each other, then back at me. "Well, we'll keep that in mind. Now I'd suggest that you go home and get yourself some rest."

"You're not...going to take me in?"

"For what? Meeting us at an empty apartment? Having a scratched face? Go home." He shook his head slowly. "Let me tell you, I've seen people gone four, five months and then they come back safe and sound. Drives their families crazy, and the families drive us crazy. You want to file a missing-person report? She has to be gone at least a month for that."

My hands gripped each other tightly. "She might have drowned herself."

"Oh? What makes you think that?"

"She...worked with someone who drowned. She was very despondent over his death."

"Well, we haven't had any reports of drownings lately. Of course, if she threw herself in the river, she *might* not have been found yet. She normally carries identification, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"All right, we'll look into it. But there's really no point in worrying. She'll probably turn up when she's good and ready."

We went downstairs in the elevator together, and they watched me walk to the tram and catch my line before they got into their vehicle.

I had made myself a murder suspect, but I didn't care. I felt drained. Where was she? What had she done? I tried to put myself in her place that night after I had left. I tried to feel what she must have felt. Fury? Hate? Despair? I tried to feel that I had seen someone I loved die. It didn't seem difficult. She had lost someone. I had lost her. What next?

Kansas City fled by as I leaned against the tram window, and I hardly saw it. I saw Ellsworth instead, in my mind's eye, and Logan stalking the streets with a star on his chest and a pair of forty-fives on his hips. Kansas City was cool with November, but Ellsworth was dusty summer, always would be for me, since the first day Holland and Alison had worked together.

And then I knew where Alison had gone.

When I got home I checked out the Kansas air schedules and called in my reservation for the next hop to Salina. The computer answered my query on Alison: she had taken the same route the morning after I left her.

At Salina I rented a vehicle and drove west on old Route 140. The new highway, the rental agent told me, was restricted to wheeled traffic and very crowded. This road was in poor repair, but it was virtually deserted, and my hovercraft made good time over the cracked pavement. In less than an hour I was in Ellsworth, seat of Ellsworth

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County, population 2000.

Foolishly, I had expected to recognize the town. But a century and a half had erased the old village, and this Ellsworth could have been any county seat of the Great Plains—courthouse in the town square, traffic circle around that, streets extending grid-fashion from that center. The latest vehicles were parked at the curbs, both hovercraft and ground cars, not a horse in sight. And the dust had been laid by the damp November breeze. Citizens walked casually in the cool morning, dressed like anyone in Kansas City, and no one packed a gun, not even the traffic cop stationed by the stoplight in front of the courthouse.

I parked by a meter, fed it my credit card for the eight-hour maximum, then started my stroll around town. I really didn't know where to begin. I was disoriented, trying to figure out where the old street had run; there was a Main Street on one side of the courthouse, but I couldn't connect that with Ellsworth's old Main Street, nor the courthouse with the old court building. There was no necessity for either of them to occupy the old sites, except perhaps human lethargy. So I just wandered, spiraling outward from the courthouse, thinking that eventually I'd find the place where the Logan house had been. Alison, I thought, would most likely be there.

I walked for hours. The sun reached its zenith and began to sink. I must have covered every street in town, some twice, and everywhere I walked people looked at me, the stranger. But none of them was Alison. At last I realized that I was very hungry, and I stepped into a bar for a sandwich. The town had only two restaurants—lunch counters, really—and by that time both of them were closed. The bartender served me a hamburger and a beer, and though he looked at me rather pointedly, he didn't ask any questions.

I asked him: "Is there a hotel in town?"

"Motel," he replied, flicking a thumb toward the south. "On the big highway."

"Any others?"

"No, just the one. Nice place, though. Clean. Truckers stop there."

"Thanks." I finished my beer and paid for the meal. I left him a big tip. One motel in town—where else could Alison be?

I took the hovercraft over to the highway, and there the place was, just beyond the foot of the exit ramp, without any name but MOTEL in medium-sized letters on the roof. I counted twelve units and five vehicles; they had room for me. I didn't ask about Alison when I checked in. I didn't want the owner suspicious, and I didn't want her to tell Alison that someone was looking for her. But I glimpsed a familiar signature in the motel's records—she was there all right. In my room I settled down in a reasonably comfortable chair by the window, the heavy drapes barely

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twitched aside to give me a view of the parking lot. Anyone walking from the town would be visible to me, too, though I didn't think Alison would be walking that sort of distance.

A couple of big rigs pulled in just after dark, their headlights flashing across the building like searchlights. Sometime later, more exhausted than I realized from the long day's activities, I fell asleep. I woke in the chair when one of the rigs revved its engine at first light.

I was cramped and stiff from sleeping in the chair, especially my legs. I had been doing my traveling by Bubble for a lot of years, and that and riding the tramways of Kansas City had not prepared me for tramping all over Ellsworth. In the bathroom, I splashed some water in my face and set the coffeemaker for a couple of cups. If Alison had come in as late as I suspected, she would still be sleeping and I would catch her as she left. I waited by the window, sipping my coffee.

I didn't recognize her at first. She stepped out of a unit somewhere to my left and climbed into a small hovercraft. She was wearing a ground-sweeping dress of some heavy black material, with long sleeves and a high neck. Covering her head and shoulders was a black veil pulled back from her face for driving. She gunned the hovercraft and swung out of the parking lot, heading for town. I scrambled to follow her. By the time I was in my own vehicle, she was no more than a swirl of kicked-up dust in the distance.

She drove all the way through town, turning west at the courthouse, onto a road as old and decrepit as the one I had taken from Salina. Not far beyond the town limits, the land rose gently. At the crest of the rise, stark amid the endless stubble of harvested wheat fields, a parcel of land was surrounded by a spike-topped wrought-iron fence. The gate, replete with curlicue vines and leaves of age-darkened iron, stood wide open in the morning sunlight. As I eased my hovercraft into the small lot before the gate, I saw the gravestones, row on neat row, and the browning grass that cloaked them.

Alison was inside already, delicately picking her way among the graves, her long skirt lifted in front. She seemed extraordinarily slim in black, fragile, swaying a little as the prairie wind gusted against her. She stopped at a far corner of the cemetery and sat down on a stone bench.

It was an old place, maybe Ellsworth's original Boot Hill. Some of the markers were so weathered that their inscriptions were illegible. Those I could make out spanned the Twentieth Century, reached back into the Nineteenth, forward into the Twenty First. A few were sharp-cut in their newness. None was exceptionally elaborate, none taller than my waist—it was not a place of ostentatious grief, that cemetery. It was just a spot where the dead were laid with some respect. Aside from Alison and me, it had no

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other visitors that November morning.

Slowly, I walked up behind her. Over her shoulder I read the inscription on the marker at her feet.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
JAMES LOGAN
1853 - 1890
REST IN PEACE

It was very new. The space in front of it, however, was flat and completely overgrown with grass. If a grave lay there, it was not a recent one.

"Hello, Alison," I said.

She started at my words, her back straightening, but she didn't turn to look at me. "Good guess," she said.

"An operator has to know how to find people."

Her hands were folded in her lap, and the veil had fallen over her face, dark, shadowing her features. In old Ellsworth they would have called her dress widow's weeds.

"May I sit down?" I asked.

"Do what you like."

I sat on the very edge of the bench, an arm's length between us. "He's not buried here," I said.

"No."

"Who is?"

"Nobody. Does it matter?"

I gestured toward the marker. "You put up the stone."

She nodded almost imperceptibly. Behind the veil, I couldn't read her expression. She said, "His mother would have wanted it."

"Are you...going to try to recover the remains?"

She tilted her head, seemed to be looking down at her hands. "Not much point in that, is there? It's just bones."

I nodded. "Don't you think you should come back to Kansas City now? You've done... all that could be expected here."

"He spent most of his life here. This was his home. This is where I belong."

"You can't mean that, Alison. What about your work, your friends? What about your contract with the company?"

"Let them sue me. I don't care."

"Of course you do. You love your work. I know it. You can't give it up to...to bury yourself in this backwater."

She turned her face toward me, but the veil was a barrier between us, keeping her thoughts from me. "You don't understand me at all," she said. "And you don't know when you're not wanted. You are intruding upon my grief. I would appreciate it if you would go away."

"Grief over someone you never knew, Alison? What kind of grief is that?"

"A kind you obviously will never know."

"I know the other kind of grief."

"Fine. Go back to Kansas City and practice it there."

"Alison...Dr. Holland wants you to come back."

She let a moment of silence pass, and then she laughed a choking laugh, half a sob. "Holland. How I wish I had

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never met him! How I wish it!"

"Then...you would never have seen Logan."

"No," she said, looking at the gravestone. "Never." Then she bent forward a little and raised her hands to her face, pressing the veil against her cheeks. Her shoulders trembled, and I couldn't help reaching a hand toward her. But she shrugged off my comfort and slid to the far end of the bench. "He's dead," she murmured. "And I'm dead, too. Why won't you let me rest in peace?"

"Oh, Alison...come home. You're not going to find peace in this cemetery."

"I don't want to talk to you any more, Barry."

I stood up slowly. "All right. I'll go. I just want you to remember that if you ever need me, I'll always be there."

Her back toward me, she straightened up, shaking her head, the veil moving gently about her shoulders. "No," she murmured. "Nobody can make that kind of promise. You'll die someday. Everybody dies."

"Oh, Alison...." I half lifted my hands toward her, but no words would come. What could I say? That, yes, we all die someday—James Logan, Augustus Caesar, and me...and that emotions die as well, eventually—love, hate, even grief. I knew she didn't want to listen. So I consoled myself with that knowledge instead of offering it to her, and I turned away and trudged back to the cemetery gate.

That night I was back in Kansas City. In the morning, I added Alison's shift to my own, tolerated Holland's indignation and gave him his money's worth. Earp was in Tombstone now, the hearing that followed the gunfight at the O.K. Corral behind him, one brother crippled, another dead. Soon he would be leaving for a new life in California, and Holland would have to move on, too, if he wanted to follow his subject. He was already foreseeing difficulties for the period that Earp would be spending in Alaska—it was out of range of all the company offices. He badgered me for information about new branches to be opened, obviously hoping for Seattle or Vancouver, and he was angry when I told him that all I knew about was the one in Tokyo.

He was gone by the time Alison came back.

I had known she would, known it in my soul. She was an operator first, like Myra, like me. Nothing could make us quit. Nothing.

She didn't speak to me. I passed her in the corridor a few times, but she just looked through me, walking briskly, as if to some important meeting.

She transferred to the Tokyo office as soon as it opened—looking for a new challenge, Myra said. Shortly afterward, I returned to Istanbul. To Imperial Rome. Someone needed an expert on Augustus Caesar.

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Books

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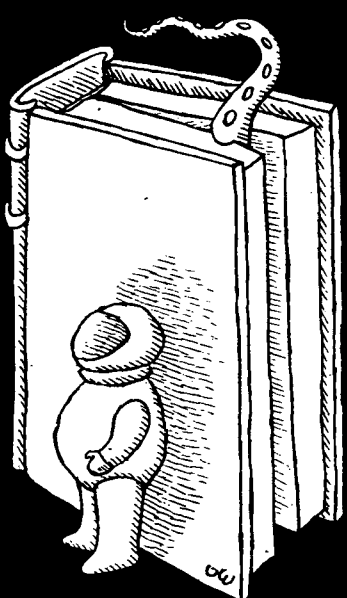

The Complete Venus Equilateral, George O. Smith. Del Rey, $2.25

The Great SF Stories: 4, Asimov & Greenberg, Ed. DAW, $2.50

The Nitrogen Fix, Hal Clement. Ace, trade paperback, $6.95

Microcosmic Tales, Asimov, Greenberg & Olander, Ed. Taplinger, $12.95

100 Great Science Fiction Short Short Stories, Asimov, Greenberg & Olander, Ed. Avon, $2.50

You know, if you're going to claim an understanding of the roots of contemporary SF and point to what its appeal is, you're going to have to demonstrate an understanding of the work of George O. Smith. I'm not sure you can get away without it.

This may seem strange. Smith's is not the first byline thought of when listing the heroes of the Golden Age of "Modern" science fiction, 1939-'49 in the pages of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine. Scholars agree that ASF under John W. Campbell, Jr., transformed the field; seized the imagination of SF magazine readers as never before, held it as never since, and left an imperative toward excellence which now pervades all SF media and promises to those who want it a *rapprochement* with formal literature. But few scholars ever mention Smith except in passing.

The Golden Age now is what we want to make it. The real Golden Age, that really was and had real effects and seeded us, was something different.

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Now we make lists—Heinlein, Asimov, et al—which go into reference books, and anthologies drawn from reference books. We have a consensus. During the actual Golden Age, however, we did something few contemporary scholars have ever done. On a library table, so to speak, we piled 132 issues of ASF, give or take half a dozen, and we read every word. We noted who got the cover paintings, who was blurbed enthusiastically in the filler feature that announced next month's contents, who rated high in the reader preference features in the letters column. And if we were to do that again now—using the fantastically valuable, brittle, yellowed pages, or if Gregg Press were to produce a complete run of facsimile editions—we would make some curious discoveries.

Just for offhand instance, we would discover that L. Ron Hubbard was a major, central figure, not a fringer. And that the same is true of A.E. van Vogt. Which all by itself is curious as hell, because neither one of them knew enough science to get salt out of a shaker. Worse, they had no feeling for it, and they displayed this tone-deafness repeatedly in the full view of ASF's supposed audience of dedicated scientophiles as gathered up by a narrowly technocratic editor. And yet—I promise you this; take the 132-issue test—anyone making lists in those days had Hubbard and van Vogt right up there with Heinlein and Clement, a step above the young Asimov. There may be one or two things about the Golden Age that aren't quite being grasped.

Between the November, 1942, ASF and the November, 1945, issues, we would discover George O. Smith. The real George O. Smith, with the real Venus Equilateral series,* which among other things got Smith ASF's cover with his second published story. Well, that's all right, you say, because the VE series was quintessential wiring-diagram stuff, all about a gang of genius engineers based on a libration-point space station in Venerian orbit, doing all sorts of monkey tricks with interplanetary communications relays, sunpower, matter transmission and matter duplication. Obvious engineer-candy. Yeah, and that's your fundamental error right there. You're right, and you're also insufficient. George is not to be confined to thumbnails.

A strong argument for a broader scope in the VE series occurs from the mere fact that Del Rey—that's *Judy-Lynn* del Rey, SF editor and one of the shrewdest marketers ever appointed to a vice-presidency by a publishing conglomerate—has seen commercial sense in bringing out a second printing at a

**Approximately. In its 1947 book edition from Prime Press,* Venus Equilateral *added the new story "Mad Holiday." The Del Rey version,* The Complete Venus Equilateral, *adds a 1973 story originally written for an anthology. Somewhere along the line, too, there's been textual updating, and the incorporation of stories not originally in the series, including some by "Wesley Long."*

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time when no one is doing story collections of any sort, they say.

How can this make sense? The technologies of the VE universe are hopelessly outdated. Even to appreciate them as curiosa, an engineer would have to be a conscious antiquarian of electronics. The series in ASF came to a halt at just about the point where, in the real world, solid-state circuitry began. To your average contemporary technician, that's pre-history. Irretrievably lost are some if not all of the pleasureable tech nuances available to 1940s readers of tales in which dynodes might be trimmed with a cutting torch and cathodes tuned with a twelve-inch wrench and a ball-peen hammer.

In which case, what *else* is in these stories? How might it relate to Smith's overnight popularity with what was clearly not a homogenously technocrat readership? Is there perhaps something in there that works in tandem with the reader appeal of science-ignorami Hubbard and van Vogt, unlikely as that seems in the light of contemporary wisdom?

Ah, well—first let's look at some obvious possibilities, and dismiss them.

First of all, George O. Smith is not what you'd call your expert plot-technician, tightening the screw of tension until the reader screams for release, wrapped up in the heroes' personal problems and hardly caring whether the tale involves electrons or cabbages. Don Channing, Walt Franks and Wes Farrell are characters who work as a team and represent (A) the mature expert, (B) the inspired tinkerer, and (C) Galileo Galilei. That covers all the bases; absolutely nothing in the heedless Universe does not find its prompt, apt response in them. These are people who cannot get into trouble. Furthermore, Smith ruefully concedes in marginal notes that most of the problems they solve are not personal except in the sense that they represent hurdles in their professional careers. Which is just as well, because in the remaining cases where one of Smith's ineluctably slimy villains has them strapped to the sawmill table, they show an almost ludicrous ability to burst their bonds with a last-minute superhuman effort, or to enjoy a coincidental visit from the U.S. Marines.

Second, if you are expecting something equivalent to James P. Hogan, Charles Sheffield or Hal Clement with one of his infrequent short stories, you'll be disappointed. The tech problems are solved spectacularly, but there is no great sense of difficulty to them. They go like a row of dominoes spelling out CUTE NOTION click click click. I know just enough electronics to butcher out an oscillator from a Radio Shack kit, thus rehabilitating my kid's Cubby Bear phonograph, and so I may be wrong. But I'm struck, through such experiences, with how much Smith's technology develops exactly like kit-building as distinguished from designing. "Let's build a betatron,"

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Channing says, and they do. They point it at Hellion Murdoch, vivisectionist and space pirate, and punch the button. Down he goes. It's a set of photo-illustrated directions. The guy holding up the subassemblies for the photographer has no solder burns on his fingers.

Well, what, then, made Smith go over so big? Consider his first story, "QRM—Interplanetary," surely one of the least expertly plotted stories of 1942, and one of the most lecturesome and least tech-developmental stories he ever wrote. What in this piece caused him to be seen as bursting upon the audience in a manner so spectacular that his second appearance ever in any magazine earns him ASF's cover? What makes him still a viable property? What makes him still fun to read—because he is, he really is, and mind you, I'm the guy who while reading them was making a mental list of all these fine and ultimately irrelevant points of detail criticism on his technical grasp of writing.

There must have been ten or twenty contemporaries of Smith who could have written these stories "better" than he did, if what he was was a would-be storyteller, or a would-be wiring diagrammer, or both. But that's not what he was, whether he knew it or not, and whether we knew it or not. He was exactly like Hubbard and van Vogt; the fact that he knew a great deal of science was irrelevant. I suspect it was irrelevant to all Golden Age authors, although we didn't admit it then and some of us would rather die than admit it now.

What Smith was superb at was not at depicting what it's like to do engineering, and it's not at all central to his effectiveness that his idealized protagonists were engineers. They could have been cabbage-throwers, as long as they displayed the same unquestioning comradeship, the same unencumbered sense that they had the handle on the universe, and the same validated ability to grab that handle and twist. It's Hubbard with his kingslayers and van Vogt with his cosmic supermen all over again, and just about as sophisticated. Don Channing and Walt Franks are the kind of guys you hate to sit next to at a restaurant, because they're so damned loud, so sure the world is their oyster, and having so much fun that they're utterly intolerable because you're not them.

But when you read the stories, you are them.

A person who knows a great deal about general literature and science fiction — Betty Hull, if you must know — picked up on a dinner-table remark of mine the other afternoon and said "All right, what *is* SF about, Bigmouth?" and quick as a flash I said "It's about how to live." "So's all of literature," Betty replied, and her table-companion and my wife both chuckled to see the ball come whistling back into my court with so much topspin on it. "Well, it's different in SF" I mumbled

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into my breaded veal cutlet.

And it is. I had been grappling with this review for days, confident that it all made sense because I'm confident that the writers to study are not the superstars and not the klutzes, because it's only in the middle layers that you can see what a school of literature does as a school. And George is in there. Where he went, the Golden Age went, and because we still see it as a Golden Age, however fuzzily, then yet the Golden Age lives in us. And the thing is that general literature is about the best known ways to live, while SF is about the best possible ways to live.

Thank you, Betty. And thank you, George. Thank you very much.

All right, you don't want to buy a copy of *The Complete Venus Equilateral* just to see if I'm right about "QRM—Interplanetary." Fine. Go buy, instead, *The Great SF Stories:4* (1942), edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg. It's in there, too. Along with two Lester del Rey stories, one of which is the original novella version of "Nerves;" three A.E. van Vogt stories, including "The Weapons Shop;" Asimov's "Foundation," which began the series; Fredric Brown's "The Star Mouse," Lewis Padgett's "The Twonky," Donald A. Wollheim's memorable "Mimic," Anthony Boucher's "Barrier" and Alfred Bester's "The Push of a Finger," and Hal Clement's "Proof." The Boucher and the Bester aren't very good, although everyone cites the Boucher as a seminal work and the Bester shows great promise. The rest are at worst exciting and propulsive, at best beautifully worked out examples of what the Golden Age could do.

Go see if they aren't all, every one of them, propositions about the best possible way to live. Well, tell you the truth, to make that work for the Wollheim, you have to strain a little. Maybe you should just sit down and enjoy them, and never mind all this eschatological stuff. They were written to enjoy, although, again, that doesn't mean they're always optimistic or simpleminded. None of those people were simpleminded.

Whatever. This is the fourth in a series which will march up through the years, year by year, and my regret is I wasn't there.

And, by the way, Marty Greenberg tells me for sure that Isaac does indeed do a hell of a lot more than just lend his name, which means he's losing money on every minute he spends at it. But perhaps we are all gaining something more important.

The Nitrogen Fix is a new Hal Clement novel, billed as his greatest since *Mission of Gravity*, and perhaps this is true. It's irrelevant; Hal Clement is not to be graded against himself. Within certain limits, there is no such thing as an unsuccessful story by one of SF's originals, because what you read him for in large part is how well

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he does the thing that makes him *sui generis*. In Clement's case, it's the deadpan but almost fey manner in which he slips you into the viewpoint of someone who lives as you do not, and yet who lives as you would — were you given the courage, persistence and ingenuity of the typical Clement protagonist, and, of course, were you physically situated to survive in a milieu that would kill contemporary humans in a millisecond.

In this case, you might hold out for a minute or two, before you became too incapacitated to function at all. The Earth's air has become unbreathable. The waters of the Earth are acid.

Something — and Clement never commits himself as to what it was — upset the balance millennia before this story opens. All of Earth's present ecology is gone, and all that remains of any work of contemporary humankind are some panes of window glass. The acid rain has gotten all the rest. A few humans survive, by making and trapping oxygen, by taking care not to expose their eyes (and other sensitive tissues) to the mild nitric acid of the seas, and for the most part by clustering in dug-out cities at a paleolithic level of culture.

The cities are populated — increasingly less populated — by parochial, timid people ridden by superstition, tending their air-making plants and food patches, banishing rebels. The latter become nomads, surviving by living in breathing masks or under oxygen tents, trading such items as salvaged glass or bits of copper for various small things. Small is the key word; every physical action, every spoken word, has to be carefully considered for its survival value.

The human protagonists of Clement's novel are a nomad family, trying to get along, trying to keep their daughter out of the hands of the city people, who will clap her into a "school" to teach her things her parents know are nonsense. Clement is not noted for characterizing humans. Nevertheless, in this case he's done a notably good job of showing us a man who's not too bright, not too flexible, yet equipped to survive; a wife who's smarter than her husband,* but values him; a daughter who's remarkably more advanced in mental maturity and learning skills than a contemporary small child normally would be — because she has to be — but who's a child nevertheless.

There's a complication. Also in the cast of characters are star-traveling alien observers — a nonbreathing race of highly intelligent but limited beings, handless but tentacular — who can transfer experience organically, by pressing against each other and letting knowledge flow from one to the other and vice-versa. They also reproduce

**I don't suppose they're married, but they appear to be. Clement ellides the point, just as he never spells out why the brief garments of these people have to be skin-tight. The book is suitable for adults of all ages.*

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arthenogenically. So there are no true ıdividuals, and they have no need to ɔeak or hear.

In their travels, they have found lanet after planet which has gone om an oxygen-rich to a nitrogen-sat-rated atmosphere. Never before have ıey found one in which the oxy-reathers have survived. Fascinated, ıey try to keep watch on the humans 'ithout getting themselves killed as nimals or made to take the blame for ıe planetary catastrophe. One of ıem — so to speak, one of them, nick-amed "Bones" — becomes a friend of ıe nomad family, communicating in estures and developing a high degree f cooperation with them.

What Clement has done is create a 'onderland — a place where there is re but no flame and many plants are xplosive on impact, where life is a ontinuous, but grievously short, CUBA dive, and where there is no way ıe hero can save the world. He can nly survive, she can only survive, and hope for the best. The aliens can't rescue them — there is no air in their ships, and they have no ships — they travel in comets, guided only by celestial mechanics, preserved only by species immortality. There is no grand climax to this novel. It proposes that the search for the best possible way to live is a thing in itself, without final destination and without glory — without melodramatic glory. By that much, we have come beyond pulp origins.

It's a remarkably quiet, gentle book although its dangers are real and sometimes sharply climactic. Some will wish Clement had come right out and blamed the catastrophe on ill-advised experiments in plant genetics, on industrial pollution, or one of the other factors that might have accounted for it. But the aliens don't know, and the humans are too many generations away from the facts. So by Clement's rules, there's no means whereby he could tell us. Perhaps the hints are there — I know just enough chemistry not to pour salt

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into a wet shaker — but if so they're insufficient for me. I think perhaps the book does suffer to an extent from this lack, which could have been supplied without making the slightest change in the way the story works out. But as I sit here telling you about it, I realize that my dominant emotion about it is fondness. For a man who can't characterize, Clement has certainly introduced me to a significant number of new friends.

Microcosmic Tales is the follow-up volume to 1978's *100 Great Science Fiction Short Short Stories*, which Avon recently reprinted as a paperback. Like its predecessor, *Tales* contains a hundred of SF's ultrashort fictions. Unlike it, it contains a nice sampling of Fredric Brown work, which a variety of the kind of thing that publishers do to editors to literary agents and vice-versa had prevented in the first instance. Any short-short collection benefits by Brown's presence.

Between the two books, however, we get just about the whole spectrum; the compressed novels, the puns, the jokes, the exercises in technique. In *Tales*, we even get the ultimate short-short story, Edward Wellen's "If Eve had Failed to Conceive," which is remarkable in that the publishers typoed the *entire* text, doubtless wounding the author, but as far as the reader is concerned making no difference whatever.

Of course it isn't SF, so it doesn't have to fit my precepts.

Go buy the book anyway. Out of 100 stories, surely there'll be one you like. Go buy the Avon reprint, too; for the extra $2.50, you get lots of extra little japes you can pass on to people in saloons under cover of those loudmouths whooping it up at the center table. In your own quiet way, you, too, can be the life of the party.

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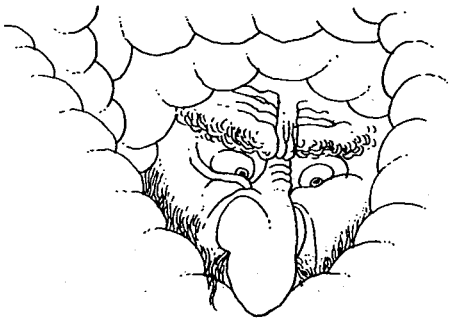

"Is this yours?"

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Terry Brykczynski writes that he studied zoology at U. C. Berkeley and did graduate work in experimental psychology at the University of Chicago. "My field expedition collection include avian specimens from Mojave Desert, crustacians from Gulf of Mexico and neo-urbanoids from New York streets where I presently operate a completely normal appearing cab along the sordid grid-pits of Manhattan." The author's novel, CAGED, was recently published by Crown and sold to the movies.

Right of Passage

BY

TERRY BRYKCZYNSKI

"Now," I said, fingering important-looking papers on my desk. "What can I do for you?"

I asked the question to both of them; it seemed proper. The lady was plump, rich, and worrying a silk handkerchief in her lap. She had put on powder, but whether to hide the wrinkles of advancing age or as protection against the sun I couldn't tell. What I did notice, and which made me extremely uncomfortable; were the moist jewels of tears in each of her bloodshot eyes. I have seen many ladies of this sort in my job but never one who sought as much pity, a demand made all the more loathsome by her fear.

The florid excesses of the woman's body were offset by the crisp tailoring of her companion. The effect of the pair was extraordinary. Where she was extravagant, his posture was lean. Where she overindulged in gaudy pearls, complicated brooches, and Victorian hatpins, he was impassive: A hint of genuine gold in his cuffs, a secure conformity in the width of his lapels, and a discreet confidence in the weave of his blazer. A natty Irish cap perched on his head at a rakish angle. His features were coarse. Although he was slight of stature, he had nimble movements that suggested a jockey or a soccer goalie. He carried a foreign air about him, consciously smug. Glossy black chest hair lunged from an open shirt. He smiled at me once, very briefly, exhibiting a set of perfect teeth, then resumed a meticulous examination of his manicured fingernails while snickering at some private joke. His long furry tail ran out of the hole in his pants and wrapped itself around a chair arm.

"What can I do for you, Mrs.—?" I

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repeated, having forgotten her name.

"Mrs. Vanzetti."

"And?" I questioned her companion.

"And Jocko."

"Jocko...yes. A fine-looking wooly."

Hearing his name, the monkey screeched and sank his teeth into the chair. Mrs. Vanzetti scowled and the monkey bared his teeth.

"Jocko!" Mrs. Vanzetti blurted. Her tears began again. As the purse in her lap shook, the rattling of a hidden chain was unmistakable. She turned even whiter than her powder. As the chain clinked, I watched the monkey's face shift from amazement and disbelief to disgust and contempt.

I had witnessed identical scenes before, but each enactment never failed to sicken me. The monkey was maturing; he was not a child any more. Hormones were surging from his pituitary and adrenal, his hypothalamus and gonads; chemical energies were battling the weak imprinting of his cortex. To the monkey, the future must have seemed just as bewildering as the dark forests of Surinam were to Mrs. Vanzetti.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Vanzetti?"

As the old lady's face rose, her jowls sagged. She sniffed tortuously. "I wish—I wish to put Jocko up for adoption."

She whispered with hoarse shame, covering her mouth as if to hide the word both from me and the monkey. But I have heard the word many times—the same wretched euphemism. *Adoption.* They never say they want to get rid of the monkeys, to lock them up, to put them in stir. It is as if the word is another one of the conventional pretenses, like the tailored suit and natty cap, or a melodramatic scene in a half-remembered movie which must be performed in life.

"Mrs. Vanzetti," I began wearily. "The Zoo does not perform a placement service for pets."

"Jocko is not just a pet."

"I can see that."

"He's been with me for many years. He sits at my table, he eats what I eat. My friends are his friends. He's not just another animal, just another pet. There's something more about Jocko."

"Why do you come to me?"

"The ASPCA said you would know what to do. They said it would be in the best interest of everyone, especially Jocko."

Of course they would tell her that, but they were correct in the referral. They knew the situation well enough—they had seen escaped pets brought in bloody boxes by bored policemen who find them mauled by dogs. If they weren't monkeys, they would be boas or ocelots, golden marmosets, or thin ferrets—all exotic and all with the Terror in their eyes.

"Yes," I admitted. "Sometimes the Society refers cases here—but only in extreme circumstances."

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"I wouldn't be here unless matters had come to that point. That is why I've decided to arrange for Jocko's adoption."

"Mrs. Vanzetti, sometimes—under special and extraordinary conditions—the Zoo does undertake a custodial function toward estranged pets. We always hesitate to do so—" Why did the woman look at me like that? "We hesitate because the conditions must be made explicit, perfectly clear, before we assume responsibility."

"I understand," the lady sniffed. "After all, I should hope that you have standards to meet."

"We do." I opened a drawer and began filling in the standard form. ANIMAL—Wooly Monkey, *Cebus Fatuellus;* WEIGHT—approximately three kilos; SEX—Male; ACQUISITION—Donation by private party; IMPORT DECLARATION/CERTIFICATE OF ORIGIN—Uncertain, probably illegal.

"I suppose you'll want to know Jocko's diet," Mrs. Vanzetti mumbled. "I have the list somewhere in my purse."

At the sound of his name, the monkey ripped off a button from his suit and hurled it at Mrs. Vanzetti. The button glanced off her neck and clattered to the floor. The animal's fingers clenched in a tight fist which shook with a furious intensity. But as soon as Mrs. Vanzetti burst into tears, the monkey leaned back calmly in the chair with a self-satisfied look.

"He likes Jello," Mrs. Vanzetti hoarsely rasped. "Mixed-fruit flavor. He likes gruel cakes of all kinds and—"

"That won't be necessary," I interrupted. "The Zoo has its own diet."

"But *treats?*" she objected. "Isn't life unbearable without treats? I see now that I'll have to stock up when I visit Jocko."

"There won't be any visits allowed," I said slowly and calmly.

At first she looked puzzled, as if she didn't hear me. Then she frowned. "But how will I see Jocko again?"

"You won't, at least if I have anything to do with it. Pets who come into contact with their previous owners often go into a frenzy, a sort of madness. They abuse themselves, their cagemates, or others. We can't afford that to happen."

The lady's face clouded and I realized that it was now or never. I spoke quickly and forcefully, seizing the opportunity. "As a matter of fact I can't guarantee that the animal will remain in this Zoo at all."

"What do you mean? He's lived in this city all his life."

"Mrs. Vanzetti, in order for the Zoo to take your monkey, you will have to give me your informed consent. Once you sign this paper, it allows the Zoo to decide the animal's best interest. If that means we have to sell or trade the animal—"

"*Sell?*" she gasped. Her eyes narrowed. "If it's a question of money," she began icily.

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"It's a question of the animal's best interest," I interrupted just as coldly.

The woman's eyes flared again. "I hardly expected matters like this to be influenced by profit."

"The profit," I said loudly, "was extracted from this animal the last time he was sold." The fact predictably stiffened her.

"Really, I don't think you know about monkeys," she protested. "I don't think you care about them at all. Why should I believe you? How do I know you won't sell Jocko to some laboratory? How—"

The lady twitched her nose, and both of us became aware of the pungent odor of monkey urine. The monkey crossed his legs deliberately and triumphantly.

The woman stood slowly, breasts heaving as she tried to control her breath. Her shaking hands were as red as her flushed neck. There were equal parts of rage and embarrassment in her pose; attack and flight strained against one another.

"Now then, Mrs. Vanzetti, will you sign the consent form?"

"Maybe...maybe I should think this over," her voice quavered.

Here was the moment, I thought. All had come to this. She could continue her pretense of finding a "suitable" home. She could gather up the unruly child in her arms and stalk away from what all of her friends would agree was my cold and impersonal affront. Or she would look Jocko in the eyes and see in them promises of broken china, smashed crystal, a covenant of revolt. But for all my brusqueness I understood her torture far more than she would ever be aware. She and Jocko had given something of each other; a bond had been formed however unnatural, and although neither side was correct in their assessment of each other's degree of control, still they had shared life. If Jocko was as yet unaware of the full extent of Mrs. Vanzetti's betrayal, I could see his eyes testing the depths of her agony.

"I'll sign," whispered Mrs. Vanzetti. She scrawled her signature, shielding the paper from Jocko's suddenly suspicious eyes.

I nodded and put the paper away. Then I gave my instructions quickly and softly, as I have done so many times. "You must leave immediately. Don't look at the animal, please. He must not become aware that you're leaving. Act as if you're stepping outside momentarily. If you want his clothes I'll forward them to you."

I was not prepared for the look of absolute hatred she gave me. Her nostrils flared and her eyes assumed a greenish intensity that I have only seen before in the eyes of domesticated circus lions preparing to attack. Then she turned away, clutched her purse, and made her exit as I instructed. I wish all such exits could be executed likewise. In the end, as always, I was left with the monkey.

I lit a cigarette and stared at him.

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He regarded me with beady eyes. The monkey sat motionless, except for his tail which pragmatically explored the chair. His hands remained folded in his lap, and except for an occasional moistening of his full black lips by a darting tongue, I would have applauded his aloofness. After a nod passed between us, a perfunctory exchange of formalities, I cordially offered him a cigarette, which he took diplomatically. I thought he might have used a Dunhill lighter, but instead he took out an ordinary book of cardboard matches.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," I said. We smoked in silence, still unsure of each other, while we prepared our protocol. "Tell me, Jocko—" I began. But before I could finish, the monkey bared his teeth in a testy snarl and leaped onto the floor. He paced angrily in front of my desk, hissing and jabbing the cigarette at my chest.

"Let's get one thing straight," he screeched. "My name isn't Jocko. It's Roberto. Roberto Estes Salazar."

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"Because I don't break the rules," he growled. "She hung what she wanted on me."

"Then she doesn't know?" He shook his head and I relaxed. It's never wise to take things for granted with these New World types. "You're quite sure?" I pressed.

"What do you take me for, a goddamn Colobus?"

I shrugged my shoulders and apologized. In the beginning it's always better to let them have their way. Salazar stubbed his cigarette out and lit another while continuing to stalk back and forth.

"Why do you want to come here?" I asked. "It was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Of course."

"How did you hear of us?"

He looked at me shrewdly. "The word gets around."

"Apparently."

He calmed somewhat, but still took short puffs from his cigarette. He laughed nervously and began a new tack. "That was some act you put on for her, I have to give you that. The old goat gobbled the cage stuff faster than an eclair. The signing of the papers, yes, that was good. She really believed it. I wish I could see her fat face now, blubbering crocodile tears over her poor lost Jocko—the hypocritical crone."

"Was she hard to live with?"

"You make me laugh." His lips grimaced. "It was loathsome, absolutely loathsome."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry? You're *sorry?* Excuse me if I vomit. You only saw her for five minutes. It's one thing to see her disgusting habits, but, remember, I had to *live* them."

"I understand."

"No, you don't," he snarled. "That's what I just said. You have no idea what it was like to crawl under

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her, to sit on her fat shoulders, to smell her odor. And always with that damn chain hidden in her purse that she didn't think I knew about. At first she pawed me, wouldn't let me go. Then she let me walk in a room, and it wasn't until years later that I was trusted with her friends. Trusted. I choke even now on the word. Forever harnessed. In perpetuity bonded to that monstrous creature. *Can you imagine what it felt like?*"

"I'm sorry," I said. I knew it was useless, but it was all I could say. Salazar's face was livid, his limbs trembled and his voice shuddered.

"*Can you imagine?*" he screamed. "What it feels like to have an old lady on your back?"

Salazar broke into tears and collapsed from an exhaustion that had finally caught up with him. Tears poured down his swarthy cheeks and collected on his chest hair. His black fingers squirmed like a cluster of tiny worms. He passed his hands across his temple and shuddered from some subterranean aftershock of memory. He seemed physically smaller, his posture more fetus-like, and his tiny head drooped miserably.

He continued to pour out his pitiful story, the cataloging of obscenities rushing from his bony chest like an exhalation of stale, poisoned air. He worked his neck like a pump handle to let the festering pressure equalize. When he finished he asked for another cigarette.

"Thank you for listening," he said. "It's been a long time since someone would listen." He hopped feebly off the chair and began to strip. First he removed his blazer and neatly folded it; then he unbuttoned his vest. His trousers were carefully laid on top of the pile, and he finally stood naked in my office. Appraising his body in a mirror, he shrugged. "It's not great," he fished hopefully, "but it'll do the job, won't it?"

"You're a prime wooly," I assured him. "The finest I've seen in years." I made a list one time and concluded that primates, with the possible exception of a few Panamanian tree frogs, require the most ego massage. Matters of vanity mean little to echidnids.

"Well," Salazar continued abruptly, "what are the hours?"

"The usual, ten to five."

"Holidays?"

"Not so fast. We run on strict seniority. One year good behavior, and I'll give you a week's leave as an escapee, but you'll be on your own outside the grounds. We'll come and get you when you call in, but aside from your picture in the paper, that's all the protection you'll get. Five years on display, and you get shipped back to your original point of enlistment. Surinam?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Home."

"There's a no-strike clause, and any complaints, see your shop steward."

Salazar bit his lips and shrugged. "Could be worse," he muttered.

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"Apparently it could," I agreed. By now Salazar had scaled the chair again and risen to his full height in order to expose himself optimally to the mirror. He puffed out his tiny chest and screeched in narcissistic ardor, flailing his fists against his breasts and smacking his lips. *"I'm free,"* he screamed. *"Roberto Estes Salazar is finally—"*

Then it happened. It took only an instant, the usual time for events of acute horror. At the same moment Salazar beat his chest in exultation, the door to my office burst open as if a person had been eavesdropping. Someone had been. In the open doorway Mrs. Vanzetti's hulk shook with a terrible tremor. Her chain of pearls rattled across her heaving breasts, and her tongue flapped like a drunken derelict. But the most astonishing aspect was her color, a deep beet-colored flush. She stared at the naked Salazar. Her eyes widened in horror as she took in his pile of discarded clothes and the cigarette still obscenely dangling from his lips. It took all her efforts to mount one choke of horror.

"He talks!" she gasped.

Everything was contained in that one gasp, nothing of substance was concealed. In one cataclysmic shock, years of ignorance were erased. The pillars of her carefully constructed life toppled, and the passage of time was revealed as nothing more than a rude caprice of some cruel manipulator. Her life rushed out with that gasp; her body remained as an empty shell traumatized by sordid reality.

But it was in Salazar's eyes that the final climax occurred. I've heard it claimed that there exist looks that can kill and those that can worship, some that can caress and some that can assassinate—if so, then Salazar's was all of them. You could see the killer in his tongue, straining like a viper to inject his venomous insults to targets he knew intimately. But you could also see tears blind his eyes in deepest sorrow. To this day I don't think he saw Mrs. Vanzetti in that instant as much as he saw a reflection of himself, of how he was before she bought him. He saw a dirty commoner, hopelessly alternating between famine and engorgement, shivering naked on tree limbs in maddening rain with the only prospects continued months of insane boredom. But Salazar had risen, he had freed himself. But he choked when he saw that the old woman could not.

"He talks!" Mrs. Vanzetti gasped.

I rose instantly, spilling a cup of coffee in my haste. "You must be mistaken," I began.

It was no use. After that moment she became unmanageable. There was nothing left but to call for qualified assistance. When the medics arrived they found her incoherent. They were forced to apply restraining devices.

Salazar hid his clothes before the medics came and somehow stole Mrs. Vanzetti's flimsy chrome chain from her purse. He threw the links haphazardly around his neck and arms

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and one good sneeze would have shaken it off, but from a distance it looked convincing. He crouched monkey-like under my desk and whimpered pitiful chirrups that of all the people in the room only I knew how much was genuine.

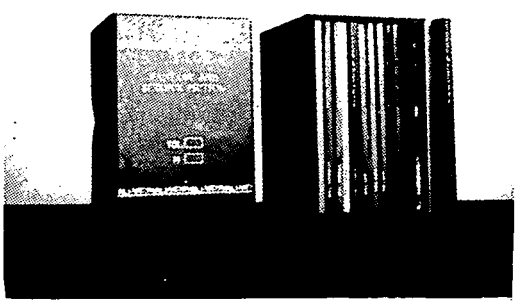
"He talks," Mrs. Vanzetti blubbered to the medics. "The monkey talks."

The interns nodded but privately shook their heads. Evidently they had encountered this particular deviation before. Mrs. Vanzetti finally fainted when they attached the coat.

"She claims to hear voices," I tried to explain. "Where are you taking her?"

"To the Clinic. Will you sign the papers, sir?"

"I suppose I must," I said and reached for my pen. To some, I suppose, my job appears exciting and colorful, but I continually explain that for the most part it is dull repetition and bureaucratic conventions. And the paperwork is enormous.



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Neal Barrett wrote "Hero," (September 1979) and "The Flying Stutzman," (July 1978). His new story begins in a manner as cozy and familiar as its title. Where it ends is somewhere else indeed.

"A Day at the Fair"

BY

NEAL BARRETT, JR.

We weren't even past Hummer's Hill and I could smell it already. Beanspice and weed-cake and a hundred other yum things to eat. The smells were floating up from all the little stands and cookpits and coming right out to meet us.

"I can smell it, Grandpa. I can smell the Fair!"

Grandpa just laughed. "We're getting mighty close, Toony, but I didn't figure we was *smellin'* close."

"Toony's always doing things 'fore she's supposed to," said Lizbeth Jean. I glared back at the wagon but Lizbeth Jean just nudged up to Mother and looked the other way.

I *do* kind of catch stuff sometimes, and Lizbeth Jean knows it. Just little things, like smells, or maybe who's coming over. Not even Grandpa knows about that, and he knows near everything.

Folks never can get over me and Lizbeth Jean. If you were looking for kids that didn't have any business being sisters, you'd come straight to us. She's about the prettiest girl on Far, and I'm near the plainest. Lizbeth Jean's got skin like brand new milk, and gold-silky hair down to here. My hair looks like it come out of a armpit somewhere, and I'm fat as a bubble.

All you got to do is set Lizbeth Jean and Mother up side by side to see where she got her good looks — including my share. Grandpa says Mother was more'n just pretty, before whatever it was happened to Papa and she kind of quit thinking real good. Papa's something nobody talks about much at our place.

When we came 'round Hummer's Hill a whole flock of Snappers waddled across the road and started hissing and grinding their jaws real fierce. Grandpa

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whacked a couple good and they scattered off quick. Snappers can't do much more'n scare you, but they do a pretty fair job of that. So while Grandpa was shooin' them off, I dropped back to where Tyrone was pulling the wagon.

Grandpa named him Tyrone after some kind of Earthie hero — only he couldn't have been one of your real big heroes if he was anything like Tyrone. According to Grandpa, he looks a lot like a big skinny anteater with the mange. Grandpa's always saying things look like something I haven't ever seen before.

"Tyrone," I said, "you goin' to have fun at the Fair?"

"Guess so," said Tyrone.

"You got some coppers, don't you?" I knew he did, 'cause Grandpa gave him some.

"Don't know," said Tyrone.

"Sure you do." I patted the little pouch around his neck. "Right in there, Tyrone. Five big shiny new coppers. Just like last year."

"Last year?" Tyrone blinked and looked dumber than ever. That's the trouble with Noords. They work real good and do what you tell 'em, but forget what it was in about a minute.

I could *really* smell the Fair, now. Not just the other way. There was bushdog cracklin' over a fire and Tingroot pie and dusty sweet-cakes yellow as the sky. "Do you smell it, Grandpa? Do you smell it *now?*"

"Toony, I sure do," said Grandpa. He closed his eyes and sniffed real good.

"What do you smell, Grandpa? Tell me!"

"I smell mustard and cotton candy, Toony. And popcorn and cinnamon apples and lemonade so cold it makes your head hurt."

"Oh, Grandpa, you don't either," I scolded. "You're just makin' things up again."

"Guess maybe I am," said Grandpa.

Like always, I acted like a kid, trying to see sixteen things at once. As if they'd maybe close the whole Fair down if fat Toony didn't see it *right then*. There were flags and ribbons and bright strips of cloth everywhere you looked. There were reds and blues and greens and yellows and colors I hadn't even seen before. There were stands selling all kinds of pretties. And games where you knocked over pots, or caught a tin fish on a hook. And there were cookpits full of more sizzlin' bushdog than you could eat in a year, and toadberry tarts and stripe candy and hot fly-bread right out of the oven.

"Better watch out," said Lizbeth Jean real sweet-like. "You'll get fat, Toony."

"You can't *git* fat if you're fat already," I told her.

"*You* can," giggled Lizbeth Jean, and Grandpa said, "Now, now, we

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come to the Fair to have fun, girls." He stuck me on one side and Lizbeth Jean on the other, and left Tyrone to look after Mother. Which was a good idea, 'cause I've been known to bust Lizbeth Jean just for the fun of it.

There were people from all over, 'cause nobody misses the Fair. There were trappers from far as Southtown, and farmers like us from High, and even folks from the Crystal Hills. *They* don't hardly talk to each other, but they all came to the Fair.

I like just 'bout everything there is to see, but I guess I like the Patchmen best of all. That's because they got something new every year, and not the same old thing. And you never know what it's going to be, 'cause like Grandpa says, the Patchmen don't either. It's kinda whatever they happen on to, and fix up good. If there's a bunch of wars going on somewhere, the fleet dumps lots of old ships and stuff on Far. If there isn't much fighting, why, you don't get a lot of new things to see that year. So anyway, it's a good way to tell how the war's going.

"Grandpa, can we? Can we *please?*"

The sign was painted in big orange letters and said:

TALK TO YUR DEAR
DEPARTED LUVED ONES
2 COPPERS

On the wagon was a rusty old box colored speckledy gray. There wasn't anything on it but a worn-out knob and a little glass window.

"I don't know," said Grandpa, scowling real hard at the sign. "It's *two* coppers, Toony."

"Please," I begged, hanging on his hand, "do it, Grandpa!"

"Does the danged thing work?" Grandpa asked the Patchman. "Reckon it does, if you're chargin' two coppers for it."

"Sure does," said the Patchman. "Come right off a Bugship, out past Dingo." He grinned real sly at Grandpa. "Hear they give them hardbacks a whole bunch of new ancestors. Took out near a sector."

"Can't hardly burn too many," said Grandpa.

"Amen to that," said the Patchman, and looked right straight at me. I guess I was kind of staring, 'cause he was real interesting to look at. He had one good arm, and one bright silver, and a shiny glass head with bright ruby eyes. Course everyone knows the Patchmen were real Spacers 'fore they got banged up bad, which is how they get first pick of all the junk comes down. Grandpa says they don't much care 'bout going back home anymore, so they just hang around Far, or someplace else.

"Isn't nothing to it," the Patchman told Grandpa, "just hold that knob real tight and talk to anyone you want."

"Anyone?" asked Grandpa.

"Well, anyone that ain't still *breathin'* real good," winked the Patchman.

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You could tell what Grandpa was thinking. He was thinking awful hard about Grandma, and whether he sure enough wanted to do this. I wasn't real surprised when the little round window blinked and went bright, and there was a man grinning out 'stead of Grandma. He was young, with old-timey hair and funny looking clothes.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Grandpa. "Jess — is that really you?"

"It's me all right," said the man. "You're looking right good, Doc."

"And you're looking a sight better'n *last* time I seen you, that's for sure."

The man laughed. "Not much sense staying eighty-nine. Not if you don't have to."

"No, guess not." Grandpa frowned at the little window and scratched his beard. "What's it like up there, Jess? I mean, they keep you busy and all?"

"Busy enough," said Jess. "There's lots to do, same as anywhere."

"I know damn well you aren't playing no *harp*."

"Never was much good at playin' things. Except maybe a little poker."

Grandpa made a face. "You wasn't *real* good at that, either. You know, I've thought about it some, being up there with all that time on your hands and not having something to do. It never did seem right to me, just switching from doin' to not d—"

Grandpa's face went white as flour. The man just kind of flicked out of sight, and there was this real pretty girl where he'd been.

"Hello, Doc. It's been a long time..."

Grandpa swallowed hard. "Mary, I — didn't want to do this."

"I know you didn't, Doc. And I know how hard it's got to be. I just had to see you, though."

"Well, I'm glad now you did. Real glad."

"You're looking fine, Doc."

"Oh, sure I am."

"No, really. Just as handsome as ever."

"I'm looking *old* is what I'm doing." He stopped a minute, and studied Grandma real hard. "I guess there's a lot of the old crowd up there," he said finally. "Folks we used to know and all."

"Sure is," said Grandma, "lots of 'em, Doc. Ellie's here, and Cora — you remember Cora?"

"Wasn't thinking 'bout *them*, Mary. Guess Will's there, and J.R., and course *Jess* is probably always hangin' around. I mean —"

"I *know* what you mean," smiled Grandma. "That isn't the way it is up here, Doc. It's not the same."

"Don't care where it is!" snapped Grandpa.

"Doc, don't do this, please."

"Well, damn it all anyway. I just —"

"Doc...."

"I can't change, Mary, just 'cause you're there and I'm here. I — Mary? *Mary!*"

You could see Grandma saying

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something, but you couldn't tell what it was, and in a minute the little window went all dark again.

"Goddamn it," roared Grandpa. "It ain't right — carryin' on like that up *there!*"

"Guess they can do 'bout whatever they want," said the Patchman.

"Well, it ain't right, I'll tell you that right now. I — hellfire, what do *you* want, Tyrone?"

Tyrone was standing right behind him, his big sad eyes staring at the little round window.

"I don't think that's too good a idea," said the Patchman, trading a look with Grandpa.

"I have two coppers," said Tyrone.

"Fine," said Grandpa, "lets you and me and Toony see if we can find some stick candy somewhere, Tyrone."

"Have two coppers," said Tyrone.

"I know you do, Tyrone."

"I have —"

"Well, just spend 'em, then," said Grandpa. "Damned if you ain't stubborn. Even for a Noord!"

Tyrone carefully laid the worn and shiny coins in the Patchman's hand and wrapped his three stubby fingers around the knob. He stood real still and looked hard as he could into the window. In a minute, it got kind of dim and gray and cold looking, like the saddest winter day there ever was. Tyrone kept on trying, but there was nothing there to see but curly-gray fog, fading way way off into nowhere.

The Patchman looked at Grandpa, and Grandpa just shrugged and sort of turned Tyrone around real easy. "Guess it ain't working right, Tyrone. Come on, let's go get that candy."

"That's it for sure," said the Patchman. "Been having a lot of trouble with it lately. And I ain't going to keep your coppers, either. No, sir, you didn't get a fair look, you don't have to pay."

"See there," said Grandpa, "you got both your coppers back. How 'bout that now?"

"I guess," said Tyrone. He let me and Grandpa lead him away, but he kept looking back at the little round window just as long as he could.

Mother and Lizbeth Jean like to stand around and watch Trading, but it seems kind of dumb to me. Everybody's got 'bout the same as everybody else, but that doesn't seem to bother folks. They'll squat on the ground all day and swap blankets, pots, candles, ropes, dull knives and sourweed soup — the same stuff they make back home themselves. And if you squat around long enough, you can even get the same blanket back you made yourself last winter. It don't make a lot of sense, but what do I know?

The only real Trading goes on with the Patchmen, and they sure aren't interested in blankets and soup. What they want is girls and *Saba*-wings. That's about the only things worth lifting off Far. Too many girls get born

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here anyway, and *Saba*-moths go through wheat faster'n rain. Lizbeth Jean's thirteen and just right for selling, but Grandpa isn't ever going to do that. No matter how poor we get. And of course I don't have anything to worry 'bout. Patchmen aren't just real excited 'bout fat girls with hair like a armpit.

At noon, the sun got real hot and the sky turned close to silver. Like always, Grandpa made us go rest under the wagon till it got cooler, and, like always, me and Lizbeth Jean just whispered and giggled and punched each other the whole time. Mother kind of dozed, her face all slack and empty-looking. Grandpa curled up and started snoring, and Tyrone sat out in the sun boiling himself. Noords won't come into the shade for anything. Grandpa says it scares 'em to see the light go away. *I* think they're just too dumb to know better.

When we finally got up, and everybody was ready to go again, Grandpa said since it'd been a fairly good year and the *Saba*-moths hadn't eaten more than half the crop, maybe we could all get some real Fair-bought food for supper, 'stead of the flatcakes we'd packed in the wagon. Lizbeth Jean and me did a lot of squealing and dancing around, till Grandpa said maybe we wouldn't eat *anything* if everybody didn't shut up and behave.

Now, if anybody likes to eat, it's me, old bubble-gut Toony. Grandpa says I can eat anything that don't eat me, and then go hunting for more. This time, though, there was more food to be had than even I could handle. After 'bout a half hour of stuffing, I didn't even want to *smell* bushdog cooking. Not ever.

"You're going to bust someday," said Lizbeth Jean. "Gonna just swell up and go *Bang!* Toony."

"An' you're goin' to get a big fat lip, Lizbeth Jean."

"Grandpa!" shrieked Lizbeth Jean, "she's gonna *hit* me!"

"Now, now, girls," said Grandpa, "this is Fair day. You know your mother don't like to see fighting."

Course Mother wasn't even paying any attention to all this. She was just staring out at nothing, like always.

Tyrone bought a knife that'd break in about a minute, and Lizbeth Jean bought a shell comb and a ring, like she does every year. I got hungry again — like *I* do every year — and bought a Ting-root pie with gooey stuff on top. Then I went back out to where the Patchmen were. There was one old beat-up machine off a Spidership, and I got what I wanted from that and had the man wrap it up real nice in a little colored cloth.

Right about then, we had some excitement. The air got hot and still, and the sun turned the sky all rusty-green. All of a sudden, every Noord at the Fair stopped dead in their tracks, big

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feet flat against the ground, long noses tremblin' in the air. You don't have to be on Far very long to know what *that* means. I hit it out quick and found Grandpa and Mother and Lizbeth Jean, and we all sat real quiet on the ground, not thinking 'bout anything, like everybody else. All you could see was folks sitting, and waiting, and not looking anywhere close to the sky. What you're supposed to do is think about not even *bein'* there — kind of a little old piece of nothing. Noords do it real good, of course, seein' they been at it 'bout a million years. It comes kinda natural if you don't do a whole lot of thinking anyway.

After a while, the Noords got all unspooked, and everyone got up and stretched and started thinking again. Off to the south you could see 'em — two big Portugees floatin' high and slow, flat-looking bodies all pearly-blue in the sun. They weren't real hungry, or looking for anything special, they were just drifting along, trailing their stingers like long rags of rain 'gainst the ground.

"They're kinda early," said a man next to Grandpa. "Means we didn't get much rain up north this year."

"Which means there'll be a sight more here than we need," said Grandpa. "Always something, ain't it?"

"One thing or another," said the man.

Mother couldn't take a lot of sun, and squattin' down waiting for the Portugees near did her in. So Tyrone took her and Lizbeth Jean back to the wagon, and me and Grandpa walked out past the cookpits again where the Patchmen stayed. He didn't say what we was going for, but I had a real good idea. Grandpa's got a spot near home where you can find good greenstones if you know how to look. He keeps what he finds all year in a little leather sack, then brings them to the Fair. It isn't something you're *supposed* to do, but Grandpa knows a Patchman who knows a Spacer who can get things off of Far.

So I stayed outside the tent while Grandpa did his business, and pretended I was too little to know nothing, which is what grown-ups like. When he was through, we walked on back out the Patchmen's camp, and right there was when the thing in the cage started yelling at us. It shook its bars and made such a awful noise me and Grandpa stopped to take a look.

"Pleez," it said, "you come heeer. Lizzen to me!" The thing sounded all the world like a sack full of gravel, and Grandpa told me not to get up close. I wasn't about to, 'cause it stuck a warty old hand out the bars right at me.

"Iz big miztake," it kept croakin', "Pleez, you help me!"

"Lordee," I said, "what in the world is it, Grandpa?"

Grandpa didn't answer. He just scratched his chin and grinned, like something real amusing come to mind. It *was* a funny-looking sight. Sort of

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like a fat old frog with foldy skin and pale yellow eyes. It wasn't wearing nothing but rags, and not much of that.

"Talks a blue streak, don't he?"

Grandpa and I both turned around, and there was a Patchman standing just behind us. Or rolling, really, 'cause he wasn't much more'n a head and shoulders set right on top of a big black box.

"Does, at that," said Grandpa. "Where'd you come by this little fellar?"

The Patchman made a face. "Got took is what I did. Traded him from a Spacer for a bottle of good whiskey. Back down at Rise-up. Figured folks'd pay a copper to see a Bug in a cage." He shook his head and spit on the ground. "That was damn good whiskey, too."

"I — am — not — BUG!" screamed the creature in the cage. He shook his bars so hard I hid behind Grandpa. "I am Vize Adm'ral Ch'rr of Procor Fleet! You lizzen to me — you help!"

The Patchman grinned and winked at Grandpa. "Never seen one yet wasn't Grand High Muckety-muck of somethin.'"

"Reckon so," said Grandpa.

The Patchman's box whirred inside and he rolled up close, till he was looking Grandpa right in the eye. "Listen, friend, you want to buy him, I'll make you a good price."

"What for?" said Grandpa. "What in hell'd *I* do with him?"

"You're a farmer, aren't you?"

"So?"

"Do a good day's work for you."

Grandpa looked at the creature and laughed out loud. "Son, if that there's a field hand, I'm Queen of the May."

"He's a real smart fella," the Patchman insisted, "when he ain't raving on like that. He can count, and read and write good."

"Don't take a lot of smart to run a hoe," said Grandpa.

"He plays chess, too."

Grandpa's brows shot up like a bushdog's tail. "He does what, now?"

"Meanest endgame you ever saw," said the Patchman, trying hard not to look too pleased with himself.

Grandpa peered in at the creature. "That right? You any good?"

"Pleez —" The thing looked up real miserable at Grandpa. "I am not Bug. I am friend. I am Vize Adm'ral Ch'rr of —"

"I didn't ask for your goddamn war record. Do you play or don't you?"

The creature didn't say anything. It just kinda sank to the bottom of its cage and started making little-whiny sounds. Grandpa looked disgusted.

"He'll come around," said the Patchman, "you get him home and settled in. He isn't much used to company."

Grandpa looked at the man real hard. "I don't think this fellar knows a endgame from a pussycat. 'Sides, he's got warts."

"I'll take just what I paid for him,"

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said the Patchman. "A good bottle of whiskey. Throw in the cage for nothing. Isn't anything fairer than that."

"Reckon not. If you need somethin' powerful ugly that don't smell good."

"It doesn't have to be *real* good whiskey."

"Right nice of you. Seeing as how there isn't no such thing this side of — *Great God and hairy little pigs!*" Grandpa stared right over my head and his jaw dropped about a foot. Before I could blink, he was out of there, hobbling past the wagon, shoutin' and waving his stick. Then *I* saw what it was and my heart went right down in my stomach. A Patchman was leading a string of girls into camp on a long piece of rope. There wasn't any of them over twelve or fourteen, and the very last one was Lizbeth Jean.

Grandpa didn't even look at her. He marched right up to the Patchman and poked his stick in the man's chest. "Boy, you got something there don't belong to you."

The Patchman stopped and looked real hard at Grandpa. Then he just swept the stick aside like nothing was there and walked on by. Grandpa let him go. When the end of the line came by, he whipped out his little pocket knife and cut Lizbeth Jean off the string. Lizbeth Jean started bawling and hung on his leg like a leech.

The Patchman jerked 'round and stared, like he could hardly believe what he was seeing. He studied Grandpa up and down, then shook his head and grinned. "Old man, you're startin' to bother me some."

"Figure to," said Grandpa.

"Just put that pretty back where you got her, and get on your way."

"She ain't for sale," said Grandpa.

The Patchman laughed. "The *sellin'* parts over and done." He patted his pocket twice. "Got the paper right here, all signed and proper."

Grandpa's face got terrible dark. "You got nothin' at all," he said softly, "'cept a poor woman's mark don't have any idea what she's about."

The Patchman brought himself up real straight. He was a mean, stringy-lookin' man, split right down the middle — flesh and bone on one side, silver on the other. You could tell by his eyes he wasn't about to give up Lizbeth Jean. 'Specially now, since three or four other Patchmen had drifted up to watch.

"Be best if you just get on your way," he told Grandpa. "I'm sure takin' that pretty."

"You're sure welcome to try," said Grandpa.

The Patchman grinned. His hand kind of blurred 'round his belt and came up with a short little blade. He flipped it over twice, letting its bright catch the sun.

"Mink, just hold on there a minute," said one of the Patchmen.

"Just mind your business," said Mink, not moving his eyes off Grandpa. The first Patchman said something to the man beside him, and the man

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looked at Grandpa, then at Mink.

"Pardo's right," said the man. "Just let it go, Mink. Leave him be."

Mink gave him a black look, spit on the ground, and started for Grandpa. Grandpa didn't move. He pushed Lizbeth Jean away and just stood where he was. Mink walked right up to him and drove his blade hard at Grandpa's belly.

Only he didn't. Or I *guess* he didn't. Right there's where it starts gettin' real hard to explain. All I know is Mink got sort of blurry a second and then he was just looking down at his knife, and laughing, and not even thinking about Grandpa. He laughed so hard the tears came to his eyes, and then he started slashin' and cutting' as hard as he could at his own belly, ripping and tearing away hard, and watching himself come apart. Everything inside came rolling out wet and shiny and spilling to the ground, and Mink kept laughing and slicing away like he hadn't ever seen anything funny as that.

Then, all of a sudden it wasn't even happenin' at all, and Mink was just standing there looking at his belly and screaming. There wasn't a scratch on him but Mink wouldn't stop. A couple of men took him up and carried him off to the tents somewhere, but he was still going strong. Like maybe now he'd got started he didn't know *how* to stop anymore.

Nobody said anything for a long time. Then one of the Patchmen walked over to Grandpa real slow. "I'm sorry about that," he said, "just real sorry."

"It's over," said Grandpa.

"Pardo said it was you, said he recognized you right off. An' I said hell, Pardo, you know it ain't *him*, what'd *he* be doing way out here on Far?"

"Guess you still ain't sure, are you?" said Grandpa.

The Patchman looked at Grandpa, then got kind of white and funny lookin' around the mouth. "No, sir," he said, "I'm — surely not."

"Fine," said Grandpa, "that's just fine. Come on Toony, Lizbeth Jean. We best be getting on back now...."

By the time we got moving, there was a light breeze from the west and the moons were full up in the sky. The razortrees sparkled and made tinkly sounds in the wind, and I could hear a bunch of Whoopers start yappin' away. Tyrone hauled the wagon up ahead, with Mother and Lizbeth Jean already asleep inside. Me and Grandpa came up behind, where old Wart was pulling his cage and talkin' to himself. Grandpa said he was keepin' a good eye on him for a while, till he stopped wanting to be a admiral and settled down to some decent chess playing. *I* didn't figure he'd ever do much of anything, but what does a fat little kid know?

"I got you a present," I said after a while. "You want to open it now or

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wait'll you get home?"

"Why, right now," said Grandpa. "Once you know 'bout a present, you almost have to open it." He took the little package and unwrapped it and held up what was inside.

"You gotta open the cap and smell," I told him. "You tell this machine what kind of smell you want and it makes it right off. The Patchman said it come from a Spidership."

Grandpa took off the cap and smelled.

"It's *supposed* to be popcorn, like you're always talkin' about. Only I said throw in a little lemonade and cotton candy, too. Is it all right?"

Grandpa gave me a big grin. "Just as right as it can be, Toony. That's a real good present."

"I got Mother one, too. It's some kinda flower you can't get on Far. Maybe it'll help her remember stuff. You know, like you do."

"Maybe it will," said Grandpa. "You just never can tell."

The Snappers started grinding and hissing out in the bush again, and me and Grandpa walked along and listened. I got to thinking, and wondering about things, which I do sometimes. Like what happened to Papa, and why Grandpa had to play like bein' a farmer when he wasn't. All that stuff I'm not supposed to ask about. There isn't any end to that kind of thinking. So I started thinking 'bout bushdog sizzling and sweet-cakes and Ting-root pie and how the Fair would be next year. I figured I was growing up some, 'cause I decided right then and there it didn't do much good worrying about being fat and havin'hair like a armpit. When it comes down to it, you're either a Toony or a Lizbeth Jean, and isn't anything you do going to change it....

ANSWER TO ACROSTIC PUZZLE IN FEBRUARY ISSUE

Quotation: A few of them seemed to move, like the white-hot jets of spaceships. Down below it looked as if the whole town of Ironmine had blown or buttoned out the light and gone to sleep, leaving the streets and spaces to the equally unseen breezes and ghosts. Author and work: Fritz Leiber, "Gonna Roll the Bones."

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This first rate story, built around the idea of a space station which operates solely to treat space-induced psychoses, is Warren Brown's first published story. Mr. Brown is a 32-year-old technical writer/editor who lives with his wife in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Last Song of the Voiceless Man

BY
WARREN BROWN

"We will be docking in approximately ten minutes," said the voice over the shuttle's cabin speakers. "All passengers please stow any loose items in your seat lockers. If you need assistance, please ask the attendant when he stops to check your safety harness. All harnesses must be fastened, please."

Miriam checked her harness, then reached for her handbag on the empty seat next to hers. Its strap caught on the armrest, causing its contents to spill slowly out in the fractional gravity of the shuttle. Swearing silently, she managed to retrieve some items before the rest alighted lazily in the aisle. Her harness wouldn't let her reach them, and she started to unlatch it.

"No need for that, miz," said the attendant as he stooped deftly and retrieved the contents of her bag: compact, lipstick, unopened bottle of tranquilizers, notes for her dissertation....

"There's a photo," she said. "It went under the seat there."

He picked it up, glancing casually at it as he handed it to her.

"Nice-looking couple. Family?"

"No," she said, attempting to smile. "Friends. Thank you."

The attendant put her bag in the seatback locker in front of her and latched it closed. He then checked her harness and passed up the aisle. Miriam stared at the photo. Loose items in the locker, she thought. The memories came tumbling into her head the way her possessions had tumbled into the aisle. Jason and Myra smiled at her from the picture she had taken of them only a year before at their engagement party.

She hadn't forgiven herself for the crash. It seemed so unfair for the driver to live and the passenger to die. "Short

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in the guidance system, wet road. Not your fault," the police had said.

But I'm alive and they're dead, Miriam thought.

She remembered the way Jason had looked at the funeral when Myra's casket went into the ground. How hopeless he looked, how empty, but with a resolve showing through the pain that she recognized. There was a decision in his eyes, a decision in his voice. And though Miriam had gone home with him, used everything in her training to change his mind, it had been no use.

She remembered how calm his face was when he asked her gently to go, saying he wanted to be by himself. She had offered to stay that night; he'd only smiled.

"I'll call in the morning," she had said. "Try to sleep."

"I'll sleep," was his reply. "I'll sleep." He had kissed her, and in the morning when she called, his phone had rung and rung and rung.

I'm the expert, Miriam thought bitterly, putting the photo into her pocket, expert at love, expert at healing minds — excluded from the former, failed at the latter.

She started her mantra and watched the forward television screen as the globe of the huge space station grew, an open dock waiting for her like a mouth. The station filled the screen, the mouth closed over her. A soft thud shook the cabin; the shuttle was docked.

"Welcome to OPTH," Hirem Kelser said as he offered his hand to Miriam. He had a firm handshake. She looked down at his electric blue eyes and the paunch that threatened to overrun his belt and started to like the little man. In person he eschewed the formality of the OPTH-Earth video calls that had arranged her study visit to the station. "Thanks," she replied. "It's good to be on the ground, or something like it, anyway."

"Don't thank me yet, doctor," he said. "This receiving area is gravved to nearly Earth normal, but different parts of the habitat go anywhere from zero to two gee. It can be rough on the stomach until you get used to it."

"I hope I can get used to it, Mr. Kelser," she replied.

"Hirem," he said. "Make it Hirem, now we're personally acquainted. Good Krishna, I just administer this place. You doctors do all the good work."

Miriam felt herself blushing. "Please, call me Miriam. And I'm not a doctor yet. This visit is for my dissertation, if I ever finish it."

Kelser took her arm and guided her into a lift. It hummed softly and descended into OPTH.

"*Psycho Symbiotic Therapeutics, Cure or Maintenance,*" said Kelser. "I've read excerpts in the journals, and as far as I'm concerned, you're a doctor now. You've taught me things I didn't know about what's done here, and I've been up for eight years.

The lift doors opened and he guid-

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ed her out. She started to thank him for the compliment when his birthstone ring began to warble, its emerald flaring bright green.

"Kelser," he said into it, then held it to his ear. "Right away," he said to the ring, then turned to her. "Something's come up and I've got to run. Your room's straight ahead, then right, then left to Red Section, A-18. I'll join you there. Your bags will be brought."

Kelser patted her on the shoulder, did an about-face, and disappeared back into the lift, leaving her open-mouthed and alone in one corridor of kilometers of corridors inside the metal sphere of OPTH.

Curiouser and curiouser, she thought. Alice has lost her white rabbit.

"Orbital Psychosymbiotic Therapeutic Habitat is the most ambitious experiment in psychosymbiotic therapy. This space habitat, two kilometers in diameter, orbiting high above Earth, allows the duplication of climatic and gravitational conditions identical to those extraterrestrial conditions thought by some to be paramount in the treatment of many space-induced psychoses. OPTH is the most controversial extension of the psychosymbiotic therapy movement. While many believe it provides no more than a no-cure, dead-end asylum for what laymen call the 'space mad,' OPTH is thought by some to hold the only hope of acceptable adjustment for its hundreds of patients, 'acceptable adjustment' being the patient's reestablishment of some conceptual matrix that allows him the most peaceful, useful, and untroubled life in or out of 'conventional' society, depending on the success of his therapy, or lack of it." — excerpt from Chapter 6, "OPTH," *Psychosymbiotic Therapeutics, Cure or Maintenance*, Miriam Kelly.

Miriam turned the corner and knew she was lost. The corridor was wide, well-lit, and empty. She looked at the nearest door to find a room number, but where the number should have been was an empty rectangle of metal. It was the same for every door. She found a large plexiglass rectangle fastened to the wall. It looked as if it might have once contained an installation map, but it too was empty.

Alice, Alice, Alice, lost in wonderland, she thought. And in the silence of the mint-green corridor the thought echoed back to her. She considered simply sitting on the resilient floor and waiting for someone to find her, but swore silently at the idea of herself, a licensed psychocounselor, being found befuddled and petulant like a lost kid in a department store.

Hardly a proof of my restored ability to cope, she thought.

Trying to be angry at Kelser for leaving her alone, but only succeeding in being angry at herself, she stalked to the nearest door and attempted to knock. Her knuckles thudded softly

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against the same resilient material that coated the floor.

She wondered then if it even were a door. It was the same color as the rest of the corridor and defined only by the minutest crack of a door-shaped outline. Thinking now of ancient padded cells, she pressed down her palm where a normal palm plate would be. The door slid open and she walked into red: rose sky, rust clouds, scarlet sand, and a blood-red pool. The alien reality of it engulfed her, the impossible reds suffused her, the cinnamon smell of something not cinnamon overpowered her, and she turned quickly to re-enter the corridor. But the door was now a ruddy rock-face, and her quick turn propelled her into the air as she realized she was in fractional gravity. Arcing back through the air helplessly, she backflipped 360 degrees and splashed feet-first into the pool.

Even as the warm liquid closed over her head, Miriam realized she had blundered into a therapy room whose conditions duplicated some key locational complex of an OPTH patient. Lost in a world of blood-red blindness, she fought to hold on to the knowledge she was in a construct, something put together of plastic and holographs by people like her to help readjust a space crewman or explorer driven over the edge by something he had found in the great emptiness beyond Earth and its familiar solar system.

Guessing at a direction for up, she stroked mightily with her arms as she ran out of breath. A moment later her head struck the bottom of the pool and she inhaled cinnamon-tasting water with more a feeling of surprise than fear.

How silly, she thought, and lost consciousness.

She awoke to lips on hers. Disoriented, feeling caught in some attack, she lashed out and felt her hand caught gently, but firmly. The lips disappeared from hers. "You're all right," sang a woman's voice beautifully. "I pulled you out of the water."

Miriam opened her eyes to the alien red, trying to locate the speaker. Her throat felt as if someone had tried to hang her, and when she tried a deep breath, more water came from somewhere in her mouth and choked her, making her bruised head throb and the alien landscape waver in her eyes. Almost vomiting, she managed to sit with her back against the rock wall until her vision cleared. Her two rescuers stood at the other side of the pool.

The man was tall and athletic-looking, with red curly hair and a wonderfully wild red beard. The woman was nearly as tall as the man, slim, with sorrel hair, straight and falling nearly to her waist. They were both dressed in close-fitting russet coveralls that Miriam recognized as variations on the uniforms the shuttle crew had worn. She could make out no details of their faces; it was too far across the pond.

By now she was reoriented and realized they meant her no harm, but the

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alienness of the room still bored in on her. She felt dizzy; only the fractional gravity allowed her to stand.

"Thank you," she called hoarsely across the pond.

The female member of the pair cocked her head attentively in a way that seemed to Miriam somehow bird-like.. The movement disquieted her. She wondered if the woman had understood her. I'm sure it was her voice I heard coming to, she thought.

The man had been gazing quietly across the water at her. He suddenly raised his hand in a wave and stepped smoothly behind the woman, who moved her head quickly again. The man's hands passed gracefully over his companion's body in a smooth and complex series of movements. And with the movements of his hands the woman sang.

"You're welcome. Help will be here soon." The man's hands stopped.

Miriam's eyes widened and she stepped toward the pair. As surely as she knew the woman's voice had sung the words, she also knew the man had really said them.

Fascinated, she called out, "I'm sorry I frightened you. Please come back here so we can talk."

"I never talk," sang the woman beautifully as the man's hands slid delicately over her. "You'd better rest. Help is coming."

"Please," Miriam called, but the man leaped gracefully into the air, arcing nearly to the chamber's sky ceiling. The woman followed him. Miriam watched as the pair described a dreamy, slow-motion curve into the water, first the man, then the woman. As they disappeared beneath the surface, the liquid splashed languidly into the air. It was still falling back when Kelser and the medics came through the hidden door.

"It is oversimplification to say the psychosymbiotic constructs in which OPTH patients live duplicate some exact set of conditions the patients encountered in space exploration and which supposedly contributed to their psychoses, though this may sometimes be the case. In fact, the constructs are perceptual complexes, carefully conceived, based upon patient reactions to sophisticated perceptual tests conducted on a multisensory basis. The constructs are intended to allow the patient the most physical comfort and peace of mind possible in his state of sensory and psychic disorientation. Study has shown that patients suffering from symptomatically different psychoses can be made comfortable in the same construct. Patients are said by advocates of this therapy to reach a 'symbiotic' relationship with themselves and their surroundings. Attempts to identify certain classes of constructs of therapeutic value to certain classes of psychoses have shown mixed results but seem encouraging. At any rate, patients are seldom able to

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function outside constructs until at least a partial cure has been effected." — excerpt from Chapter 6, "OPTH," *Psychosymbiotic Therapeutics, Cure or Maintenance,* Miriam Kelly.

Miriam opened her eyes and sat up. Even on OPTH hospital rooms looked and smelled the same as they did on Earth. She felt a flood of embarrassment as she remembered blundering into the construct, having to be rescued by a patient, yet. But as her memory came fully alive, the embarrassment fled as she recalled her strange rescuers. She made up her mind at once to find out more about them. The excitement of her curiosity was curative, and she suddenly felt constrained by the hospital bed. She was just starting to wonder where her clothes were when the nurse entered.

"You have a visitor," said the nurse.

"Yes, you have, indeed," came Kelser's voice as he poked his head around the door frame. "Is she decent?" he asked the nurse, winking. The nurse nodded and he came in.

"Hello, Hirem," Miriam spoke up, wanting to get some words in to cushion whatever Kelser had to say about her blunder. "Anybody happen to say how long I'll be in here?"

Kelser laughed. "Anxious to do some more exploring? Anyway, I'm glad you're still speaking to me after I left you stuck in the guts of OPTH."

Miriam appreciated Kelser's willingness to underplay the incident and decided she liked him for sure. She wanted desperately her time on OPTH to be a clean start after the turmoil of the last year, a chance to regain confidence in herself and her skills.

"I couldn't find any room numbers or corridor maps," she said.

"Yes, well, we have a patient who removes them regularly. We never have to make new ones, though. He always piles them neatly inside his door."

"Why don't you attach them permanently?" Miriam asked.

"Oh, couldn't do that," Kelser said. "He's one of the few who'll leave his construct. Stealing those number tags and corridor schematics might be his only reason." He shrugged and sat down in the chair next to her bed. "But only you doctors could find that out for sure. I'm just the help."

"I'm surprised with what you have to do here you have time to nursemaid the likes of me. Doesn't the help have helpers to do that?"

Kelser's face grew serious. "Yes, he does, as a matter of fact. But I've a personal interest in you."

"My intense attractiveness?" Miriam replied, seeing her bandaged head in the mirror over Kelser's shoulder and thinking how her straight-featured long face and closely cut curly brown hair seemed terribly plain, pale brown eyes on top of it all, so plain. Too plain for Jason ... she clipped off the thought angrily.

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"It's your brain that interests me, my dear," replied Kelser in a perfect imitation of a perfectly awful popular actor in holovision melodramas.

She found herself smiling at that, but saw Kelser no longer was. The humor had gone out of his face like air drained from a balloon. His body sagged and he seemed to shrink before her eyes into a tired, middle-aged, pot-bellied man, drained of that electric vitality he could display so disarmingly.

"You see," he continued in a subdued voice. "Something quite amazing happened a few hours ago. My brother, who has been very ill for a very long time, has suddenly shown a remarkable sign of recovery. Rather remarkable...." His voice trailed off. He stared at his hands.

Miriam wanted to ask what that had to do with her, but hesitated. Kelser seemed suddenly vulnerable. He needed something from her. She chose her words carefully, not wanting to make a mistake. I've caused enough grief with mistakes, she thought. "Where is your brother, then?" she asked quietly.

Kelser looked up at her. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually so oblique. He's here. You met him a few hours ago."

Miriam thought back. "But you met me at the lock; then I got lost. There was only you and...." She put her hand to the bandage.

"Yes," Kelser said. "That was Ian Kelser. Most people here call him the voiceless man."

* * *

Miriam sat with Kelser in front of the large television screen in the administrator's office on OPTH. The scene they watched was the alien landscape Miriam had stumbled into. Her throat tightened as she gazed at the graceful man and woman cavorting like dolphins in the blood-red pool, the fractional gravity allowing them fantastic flights from the water, whose droplets splashed lazily after them, filling the air with red mist.

"They live beneath the pool in a chamber," Kelser said. "Neither ever leaves the construct. The halls outside it terrify them. People, even I, frighten them."

"How long have they been here," Miriam asked with her eyes still on the screen. The man had come close to the visual pickup and his face grew large in front of her, a handsome sad face, like Jason's. He turned away and something about the movement of his hand seemed to beckon her, pull her into the strange reds of the construct room.

Kelser too seemed fascinated by the scene, but Miriam saw it was the woman he watched — the singer. Her face was beautiful, calm, empty.

"Ten years," he said finally. "They had been out five on a two-man scout. Krishna knows where, the ship's log bubbles were clean as glass. Only the extra shielding saved the navigation memory and brought them back."

"They've been like this ever since?"

"Ever since. Until you came and

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nearly drowned yourself. That interested Ian enough to make him save you. He even called me to ask about you after we took you out of there. I think he's taken a fancy."

"He actually spoke, then?" Miriam said softly to the screen, her eyes on the man and woman.

"Nothing so dramatic. He still does all his speaking through the singer, by touching her as you saw. Mostly he just makes her sing sounds."

As if he'd heard them, the voiceless man beckoned to the singer, who tumbled gently to him through the air and arranged herself in front of him. He moved his hands over her. Kelser turned the volume up.

"Miriam, Miriam, Miriam," sang the woman over and over, each time differently, each time tenderly, each time in a way that moved something deep within Miriam Kelly.

Kelser turned down the volume, and with the dying of the sound something within Miriam seemed to die. She wondered how often she could listen to that singing without losing a piece of herself forever to the red room, the voiceless man. She thought of Jason and Myra and wondered how many pieces one could lose before one was all gone.

"It gets you, doesn't it," said Kelser. "Krishna knows, it gets to me."

"If it were my brother," Miriam started to say.

"You misunderstand." Kelser laughed. And his laugh had something of the singing in it, an emptiness, a loss. "I loved her before he took her away, my handsome brother in his white ship. And, of course," he added in a voice as desolate as any Miriam had ever heard, "I love her now. And him." He turned off the screen. "I want you to try to help them," he said. "From what you've written and the effect you've had on him already, I think you can."

Miriam looked at the small man seated next to her. She could almost feel the energy in those electric blue eyes being held back. Kelser ruled on OPTH. But because he was decent, and because he was in need he asked for help, didn't order it.

"I don't want to refuse you, Hirem...."

"Then don't."

"I'm a counselor," she held out her hands, imploring, "not a therapist, not yet."

"A formality, and you know it," Kelser replied quietly.

"What can I do in two months?" she asked.

"What you can."

"I don't even know if I believe in your methods here," she said slowly, looking away from him.

"Use your own methods. Whatever you like. Unless you're still having trouble believing in yourself," he aded in a gentle voice, putting his hand on hers.

He knows, Miriam thought, about Jason and Myra, about my breakdown. She pulled her hand away and

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faced him, angry words in her mouth. "What right have you to look into my past? I'm not responsible to you. I don't work for you."

Kelser put his finger to his lips. "Please," he said. "I'd not been told your bad time on Earth was a secret. I keep informed on everyone who comes here. It's my job."

"I'm sorry," she said. She was.

"Besides," Kelser continued. "You don't work for me, of course. But you must work for yourself. We all must. Those of us who can do more than others must do more." He took her hand again.

"All right," she said. "I'll try. I'll try."

"Miriam, Miriam, Miriam," sang the singer, touched gently, played like an instrument by the voiceless man. "I'm so glad to see you. I miss you every day."

"But you see me every day, Ian," Miriam replied.

"And I don't see you every day," sang the singer as Ian's hands danced over her.

"I can't argue with that," said Miriam, smiling at the voiceless man. How gentle he seemed, and how strong, so much like Jason. "What about Susan. Does she ever miss me too?" Miriam asked, looking at the singer.

"Susan," sang the singer. "Who is that. There is just me."

Miriam stepped lightly toward them in the fractional gravity. After two weeks of visits the construct was familiar to her now, a strange but nonthreatening place. She knew where the door latch was, and the intercom. She knew even how to reach the secret place beneath the water. But that place belonged to the singer and the voiceless man, and Miriam was more and more aware of having an odd feeling whenever she thought of their being alone together in their place beneath the water. She would have called it jealousy if she weren't convinced that she had no interest in the man beyond his being her patient.

And why do I need to be convinced? she thought idly. The thought troubled her in a small way and she made a mental note to explore it under self-hypnosis.

"Who is Susan," sang the singer insistently. "You always ask. And there is always only me."

Miriam gently placed her left hand on the man's shoulder and her right on the woman's. It surprised Miriam that the woman made no sound when she touched her. It seemed she sang only for the voiceless man.

She nudged them gently apart until the three of them faced each other in a close circle. She pointed at Ian.

"You are Ian." She pointed at the singer. "This is Susan."

The voiceless man stepped quickly behind the singer again and moved his hands over her. "You're playing games with me again. I'm only me. It's only me talking to you. When I touch me,

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I alone sing, just me."

Miriam fought down her frustration. She knew she was making good progress just in winning their trust. Trying to bring out their separate identities had to come slowly. She doubted it could happen before she had to return to Earth and school.

"How many persons am I?" she asked.

"You're one person," sang the singer as the man's hands moved over her.

"How many eyes do I have?" asked Miriam.

"Two," came the singing answer.

"How many eyes have you, Ian?"

"Two, like you."

Miriam held her breath. She had not tried this approach before and wasn't sure what would happen.

"Then if we are like all persons, Ian, how many eyes has a person?"

"Two," Ian made the singer sing. "This is very silly."

"And how many eyes are in this place now, Ian?" Miriam asked slowly.

The silent man stared at her. His hands worked twice against the singer, whose voice ululated at their touch.

"How many eyes are in this place now, Ian?" Miriam repeated.

"Two for each head," the singer sang joyously, leaping backward with the voiceless man in one smooth motion into the blood-red pool.

Miriam watched the water until it had settled into a red mirror from which she stared at herself. Conversation closed, she thought tiredly, annoyed that the man and woman had hidden themselves away, had nothing to offer her that day.

What could they offer me? she thought, stepping into the corridor. What could I offer them in only two months here? She was still asking herself when she reached her room, and still asking as she fell into a fitful sleep. She dreamed of Jason, or the voiceless man.

"The remarkably strong empathetic, or even telepathic, communication that develops in many victims of space-induced psychoses in their symbiotic relationships with fellow patients has no analog in more conventional psychic illnesses. Many times, especially in pair relationships, one patient may exhibit, for instance, classical autistic symptoms, but at the same time seems able to express his or her wants and needs through another patient. Many times, the nonautistic patient may be observed to assume nearly all sentient functions of both patients. The full variety of personality alterations, melds, role reversals, negations, and subsumptions has not been cataloged. No pathological grounds for patient dysfunction, or super function, have yet been found. Loss of such functions is often considered a step toward normalcy." — excerpt from Chapter 7, "An Overview of Space-Induced Psychoses," *Psychosymbiotic Therapy, Cure or Maintenance?*, Miriam Kelly.

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* * *

The man who lived in a room of floor-to-ceiling golden grass and pasteled his desires in rhyming couplets; the five women who lived in a chamber suffused by holographic fire and passed empty bottles round and round within their silent, cross-legged circle; the man and woman who walked back to back in a pit of multihued singing mud; the explorers, pilots, crewpeople, riders to the stars who had been touched profoundly and mysteriously by something in deep space that no one knew and they could not describe — Miriam saw them by the score in her days on OPTH. But more and more the red room drew her, the beautiful voiceless man, her desire to....

"... help you," she said to Ian. "I want to help you. You believe that, don't you?"

She felt she had made little progress in the last few days. And as the silent man stood smiling peacefully at her, the empty-faced singer in front of him, she wondered if she really meant what she had said. Kelser's plea had been for her to help him. But Miriam became more sure every day that plea had little to do with her visits to the construct. She was coming to realize she had used every small excuse to avoid examining her real motives under self-hypnosis. She was hiding something from herself and she felt danger in that.

"I can help you," sang suddenly through the air, pushing away her thoughts. She was startled at the beautiful voice. Suddenly the voiceless man was very close to her, the sweet-sour scent of him was around her.

"Let me help you," sang the singer gently. "Let me give you what you want."

And from the mouth of the singer a song filled the air, a song of horror and beauty, and dead planets and faceless things behind unknown stars. It was a love song and a death song and a song so mad that it tore at the roots of Miriam's mind and spun her consciousness around in a laser pinwheel of pain and joy. The song was atonal and multitonal and inhumanly beautiful, woven in a bright light of sound having no meaning and meaning everything. As the song filled her, Miriam knew what she wanted, what perhaps she'd wanted from the moment she'd felt Ian's lips on her, giving her the breath to live after she'd fallen into the pool. Before she could speak she found herself in the arms of the voiceless man, his lips on hers, and hers answering. "Jason," she said into the sudden silence of the room. "Jason."

He led her to the red pool and they slid together quietly beneath the water, swimming down to the secret place below. Miriam let everything slip away as the water closed over her and the song echoed in her mind, Kelser, her responsibilities, everything she was expected to be and do.

I deserve this, she thought in the cool, soft place beneath the water. I deserve it.

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Suddenly a mind was in hers, and she was in a mind. The voiceless man infused her, and she him. For her grief and guilt and loneliness he traded the excruciating beauty and horror of what had touched him in space, in all its unspeakable sublimity. Miriam felt feathery tentacles on her, inside her. There was suddenly another mind, inhuman, madly sane, nauseatingly beautiful. Great golden eyes looked into her and a vast mouth spoke fire. It was the message Ian and Susan had been given in deep space, and no human mind could have held its rending incomprehensibility at first hand and kept sane. They were out there. And when they met men, they spoke, those others. And when they spoke, it was beauty and madness — great golden eyes.

The alien face fell away. Miriam felt herself and Ian together in the red core of an icy sun, melting into each other, flowing together in a burning, freezing mass that screamed and laughed at once. Madly broken pieces of a single cryptic part, they meshed, became a ruby globe in a black universe that fell up into time. Time stopped, and became peace.

Miriam touched her face, felt her cheeks, her forehead — the curve of her skull. "Are you all right, Alice," she whispered to herself. She was half surprised she understood her own words. Looking around at the cushions and muted reds of the place beneath the water, she knew she was all right. Something had been transferred to her mind, like a vast lightning bolt to a metal rod. But she had not melted. She'd absorbed it and kept her shape.

She looked at the sleeping Ian where he lay beside her. Running her finger gently over the relaxed lines in his peaceful face, she tried to remember exactly what had happened. But it had fallen deep inside her, and she knew to let it stay there a while, until the time she felt ready to use her skills to go down inside herself and look for it. She lay savoring the first peace she'd had since the deaths of Jason and Myra — until she suddenly realized the singer had not come down with her and Ian. It was then she began to think about what she had done in coming down herself, and what the consequences might be.

Slipping quickly into the ship coveralls she always wore in the construct, she passed up the spiral stairs to the surface. Cross-legged, staring into the still pool, sat Susan, the singer. Miriam approached her, and she looked up with desolate eyes.

"Why didn't you come below with us, Susan?" Miriam asked. "We missed you," she said, hearing her lie and suddenly hating herself.

The singer cocked her head, that strange, birdlike motion. She stared at Miriam with eyes still desolate, but not empty. The eyes accused. Miriam felt the red room starting to close in on her. It was Earth all over again, Jason and Myra. No deaths this time. But

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once again she'd done the wrong thing, or failed to do the right one. Helplessness and guilt attacked her, pushing away the last vestiges of the mysterious peace she'd found with the voiceless man. This time she'd had no accident. She had gone beneath the water with Ian, thinking only of herself. And the accusing stare of the singer told her she'd altered the lives of all of them. If her first coming into the room had tipped a balance, her going beneath the water with Ian had unhinged it altogether.

She fled the room and moments later found herself running desperately for her quarters, moving blindly down the corridor, brushing past people, bumping into them, bitterly remembering Hirem Kelser's plea for her help.

This is how I help, she thought. I did it for myself, not for Kelser, not for the two in that construct.

She realized then that she had known what she would do from the day she had watched Ian and Susan on the screen in Kelser's office. She felt cheap. A user is what I am, she thought, I wanted that poor man in there for myself. Because of what I never had on Earth with Jason, I wanted to fix him up like some broken toy for myself, and to hell with everyone, including him.

She ran until she reached her room and threw herself on the bunk, sobbing like a child. Poor, plain, unloved Alice, she thought, hating herself more for that self-pity, the selfishness of it.

She didn't know how long she stayed, mumbling her mantra over and over, hanging on to it as if it were a branch afloat in a flood, letting the water rush around her and hanging on to the word until it was the only thing in her mind, the only thing in the cold universe.

Gradually, the flood subsided, and her room stood quietly around her. She gathered herself up and retraced her steps to the red construct. She wasn't sure what she would do when she got there, but she knew she owed Ian and Susan something for breaking into their world, even if it was a world of madness. I couldn't help Jason, she thought upon reaching the door. Maybe I'm incapable of helping anyone. But if I run now.... "Your act's together, Alice," she said her old saying aloud, touched the palm plate, and stepped into red.

The singer had not moved from where Miriam had left her. She still sat desolately by the pool. But now Ian was beside her, an expression on his face whose meaning she couldn't guess.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

The voiceless man stared at her, his expression unchanged. He knelt suddenly and moved his hands over the singer. But the hands moved haltingly, all grace gone from their movements — and the singer made no sound. Ian stood up and stepped lightly to Miriam, the unnamable expression still in his features. His hands found hers, his face came close.

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"I've lost my voice," he said hoarsely. "I've lost my voice."

Miriam saw a new thing in his face then, a thing she recognized easily because she had longed for it so often in the last few months. It was joy.

"We'll miss you here on OPTH," said Kelser as Miriam fastened the last latch on her flight bag. "Our successes are too few. We need those who can make them."

Miriam smiled at Kelser, surprised at how easy the smile felt, untaut, comfortable. "Even accidental successes?" she asked with amused irony. "Besides, Ian has really just reached the point where he's receptive to therapy. And who knows what's happened inside Susan's head now that their empathy link is broken?"

Kelser shook his head. "You're the doctor. But I think whatever's happened is to the good. If you could stay up here a little longer, maybe you could find out," he added wistfully.

"I'd be the wrong person for that, Hirem. She may still be mute, but she doesn't have to talk to show she's damned angry with me for breaking into her relationship with Ian. That doesn't make for a viable therapist-patient relationship."

"There's still Ian. Some of the staff say he doesn't need the construct now."

"No," she replied. "I wouldn't be right for him, either. If we're in each other's future at all, it won't be as therapist and patient. We've talked about it. He understands."

"You seem very sure of everything," Kelser said.

"I'm not, you know, Hirem. Just finally sure of myself."

"Because of an accidental breakthrough," Kelser said, an amused look on his face.

"Why not?" she replied.

They walked together to the shuttle concourse. Nearing the departure lock, Miriam saw a tall red-haired man waited there. For a moment she didn't recognize him.

"Hello, Miriam, Hirem," he said in a quiet voice.

"Ian," Miriam exclaimed. "You've cut off your beard."

"You don't like it," he said, a frown clouding his smooth, handsome face.

"It's only important that you like it," she replied. "But I do."

"A change," he said. "I came to say good-bye."

"Where's your nurse, old man?" Hirem asked.

"I came by myself," Ian replied, looking around a little nervously. "The full gravity's tiring. I'm afraid you'll have to help me back to my room."

Kelser put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "I'll be proud to, old man."

"I'll miss you," Ian said to Miriam, his face close to hers. There was a gentle reserve in his voice. In the full gravity, with his wild red beard gone, he seemed fragile. They kissed each other lightly and embraced. Miriam offered

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her hand to Kelser and found herself in a brief bear hug. The next moment she was watching the lock cycle close.

"A lot of people here need help," Kelser called out before the seal whirred home.

A lot of people, she thought, as the Earth blossomed on the cabin television. She watched the blues and whites on the screen and found herself thinking of the five women in the room of holographic fire. There was a key to what had happened to them. And Miriam knew she carried it down in her mind where it had fallen when she'd been beneath the pool with Ian. She knew also there could be difficulty, even danger in fishing it out. And if I got it out, would I recognize it, or even know how to use it? she wondered.

It all left such a lot of room for mistakes. She knew she would make them. But she bet Alice she could find a way to help those women, and others on OPTH. On that bet she relaxed and watched the Earth come up to meet her — watched with deeply hidden, great golden eyes.

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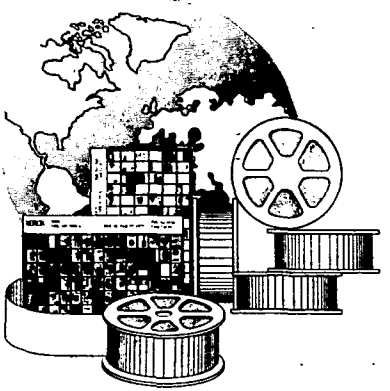

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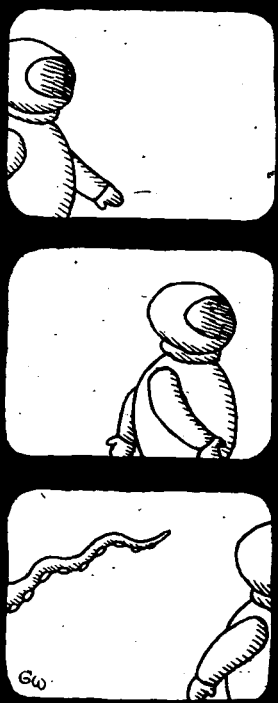

A WHOLE NEW BALL GAME

I had a revelation the other day while watching a video cassette of *The Seven Samurai* (more on that film below). Not anything epic like a revelation from God as to the number of the beast, but a sudden thought which very much affects this column.

As some of you may know, I review books elsewhere. One of the subtler, but none the less major differences in my approach to the two columns has been the fact that books are objects that can be *bought* while films and TV programs are events that must be *caught*, i.e. the consumer/viewer has to be in the right place (a theater or in front of a TV set) at the right time.

But now, thanks to the fantastically rapid growth of the video cassette recorder (VCR), movies and TV programs can now be acquired. And since a reviewer's function is at least in part that of an esthetic consumer's guide, this column will have to also take into account what is being made available to the home video market. (After all, this *is The Magazine of Fantasy and* Science Fiction, and the s/f community should, if not anticipate, at least keep up with social develpments.

What *is* being made available to the home video market so far, of course, is what in publishing parlance would be called reprints. But I have never avoided reviewing reruns in this column, or reprints of golden oldie books, since I feel science fiction's past is a marvelous

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ne (a little less marvelous on the film nd, admittedly).

So herewith a list of the more interesting movies available on video cassette, with brief comment:

To begin with the earliest, *Metropolis* and *Things To Come* are available prerecorded. *Metropolis* is, of course, silent, but it's still a staggering production. *Things To Come*'s script was actually written by H.G. Wells from his novel; its philosophy and scope are worthy of him, and it also is given a wondrous production, particularly the art deco city of the future. Best of all, it's probably closer to its original form than any version you'll see on TV.

Another two not-quite-so old favorites, *Barbarella* and *The Thing*. The former I thought a rather thin joke at the time, but on seeing it more recently my sense of humor seems to have improved. Jane Fonda is deliciously tongue in cheek as the titular heroine, and the plot is full of surprises more or less well brought off with outré characters, costumes and sets. *The Thing*, so far as I'm concerned, is as close to the perfect s/f-horror movie as you can get, immeasurably helped by the remarkable *verismo* acting and directing (and some welcome humor, also).

War Of The Worlds and *The Day The Earth Stood Still* are films a lot of people seem to like better than me, but the Pal effects in *War* are excellent, though it's terribly obvious that Wells did not write *this* script. *Day* was certainly innovative for its time in giving us an alien not to be xenophobic about, but for my money it's pretty dull viewing now.

Speaking of Pal, I hope his *Time Machine* soon becomes available. There is another *Time Machine* listed (caveat emptor) which was made in 1978, has a cast that is totally unknown to me, and so far as I know never surfaced in my area. So what can I say?

You can get *Planet Of The Apes* and *Beneath The Planet Of The Apes* if you want to. As for me, the whole series is of the apes, by the apes, for the apes.

Star Trek The Motion Picture is already available. I have acquired it (for its visual beauty and its score) but not screened it. If its breathtaking effects hold up on the small screen, it will be a good indication that *Star Wars*, whose *legitimate* release on video cassette is scheduled for March, will, too. There are several *Star Trek* episodes also released ("The Menagerie," "Tribbles," et al.).

Other more recent films that are available are *Alien*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (original version), *The Black Hole and Superman The Movie*. I wouldn't give any of 'em house room, myself.

2001: A Space Odyssey, is probably the best film of any genre that can be purchased on cassette, but it does present a problem. I'm enough of a snob to have seen it only once in any

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size less than its original, and swore then never again. Seeing it not only reduced, but out of shape on a TV screen is anathema to me. But the idea of owning all that wonder and beauty ...

The Seven Samurai is, of course, not a fantasy, but I know of no lovers of fantasy film who don't love it also. The reason came clear on that recent viewing; its mythic shape, quest and final battle are as satisfying as *The Lord of the Rings* — a Ph.D. thesis could be done on the similarities between the two. And, typically, the cassette version is *three-and-a-half* hours long, containing material I hadn't even seen first run.

There are many more, and more being released monthly. Where to get them? Video cassette shops are springing up like mushrooms; there are several magazines devoted to the field, and innumerable mail order houses.

As I noted, all of these are the publishing equivalents of reprints. But sooner or later, there's sure to be original material done for video cassette — first editions, as it were.

Apologies to those readers who do not own a VCR. Perhaps this column will move you to acquire one. I will warn you that prerecorded cassettes are still costly, and deciding what you want to see now as opposed to what you'll want to see in two years is not easy. But it *is* a whole new ball game.

Coming soon

Next month: "Murder on Lupozny Station," a new novella by Michael Bishop and Gerald W. Page, concerning a remarkable human/alien relationship and a murder in deep space.

Soon: "The Slow Mutants," by Stephen King, the longest and most exciting story in the Gunslinger series. Plus new fiction by Edward Bryant, Michael Shea, Joanna Russ, Keith Roberts, Ron Goulart, Reg Bretnor, Bob Leman, Tanith Lee and many others. The April issue is on sale March 3.

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Here is a remarkably fresh fantasy concerning the strange events of Midsummer Night's Eve in 1926. Davis Grubb is a novelist, the author of FOOL'S PARADE, THE VOICES OF GLORY and THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER (which was made into the well known movie starring Robert Mitchum and Lillian Gish).

Of Cabbages and Queens

BY

DAVIS GRUBB

But, O, if only Owen had not lied to me: if only, at the very first, she had told me where babies come from.

But she did not, could not—never did.

My father Morgan died when I was five. Now I was seven with an insatiable appetite for carving my initials in trees and an unappeasable need for the company of little girls, but with not the slightest idea of what they were good for.

Despite this frequent distaff companionship, I was incredibly lonely, being my mother Owen's and my father's only child.

With Morgan gone and nothing but little girls to amuse me in that lonely river home, I doted on Owen.

I adored her. I coveted her. I wanted wholly to possess her.

Owen was lithesome and rosy cheeked and dark—with bangs on her pretty white forehead like the movie star, Colleen Moore.

I can see yet the way her white teeth flashed like moonlight when the redbird wings of her pretty lips flew open in a smile! Yet this was, lately, rare.

For Owen was as lonely as I.

Where do I come from, Owen? I would ask for the hundredth or even two hundredth time.

And she would color up like a rose —the tendrils of pink embarrassment streaking her round, pretty cheeks and down her slender white neck to her bosoms. And she would race off to the garden to cut some of her pale yellow General Washington roses for the dinner table.

We had no servants, so that I could not go to some other, older and perhaps more candid advisor about this absorbing matter.

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I would pursue Owen into the sweet, red reek of her rose garden and tug at the sleeve of her garden smock.

Where, Owen? O, do tell me please!

Lewellyn, it can't matter yet, she would cry softly. You are only seven. In time you shall find out these things.

But I must know now, I said.

And why, may I ask?

Because I am lonesome, Owen. O, so awfully lonesome.

But if you knew how babies are got, Lewellyn—what would you do about it?

I would get me one, that's what. I would get one quick as you can wink. Then I wouldn't be so lonesome all the time.

But I repeat—you're seven, Lewellyn. And it takes years for babies to grow up enough to play with.

Then I should get me one my own age, I said. There must be a way.

At this Owen laughed her marvelous laugh, but I colored up this time and turned away, biting my lips.

It's not fair of you to laugh at me, Owen, I flared. If Morgan were here he wouldn't laugh. And I bet he would get me a brother.

Owen's big green eyes shadowed over like bits of gold that pass across a windrippled pasture when the green wind blows and clouds came all a-shadowing. I could see I had touched a tender spot.

Owen smiled her lovely, patient smile.

Lewellyn, it is true that if you had a —if I had a husband, then there'd be a good chance of your having a little playmate. But poor, dear Morgan is gone. And you won't let me get near to any man who could become a father to you.

I don't want another father, I blurted. And besides, what have fathers to do with babies.

I felt somehow very close to the truth and I pushed on furiously.

If you want a baby—why can't you just make one?

It's not that way, Lovey, she said. Someday you'll see. It's not like that at all.

Before I could help myself I blurted the question out again: Where *did* I come from, Owen? O, tell me where!

You were found, she said, unmistakably. Under a cabbage leaf.

And off she rushed to her enormous kitchen to whip up a mouth-watering saucepan of sliced carrots in brown sugar and lemon peel and butter sauce for that night's supper.

I knew she had really humored me, and not really expressed the quite justifiable resentment in her heart for the way I disposed of all her suitors. I went back into the rose garden. Its perfume, as I breathed it in in that haunted spring evening, made me feel faint with its Mystery. I bit my lip and tears flooded my eyes. I took a stick and like cruel Tarseus I slashed off the heads of a dozen nodding, dusky Beauties.

Then why do you plant roses? I

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shrieked. O, Owen, why don't you plant the whole land round with cabbages? O, Owen, I am *so* lonely!

Still Owen held her tongue, never railing at me, as would have been her right, for the trivial sick spells I put on everytime some revoltingly handsome young bachelor came to pay my pretty mother suit.

O, she was lonely as I—there is no denying it. She had five suitors who came courting her in succession in the two years since Morgan's death. I can remember the last one—the last mortal one that is—at Christmas of that year—and how I behaved was typical of all the other four. Actually, he had seemed the one to whom Owen was most honestly attracted— a rather slick-haired greenhouse proprietor from Glory. His name was Carmichael. I could see that Owen was really growing to care for him. While I despised him—as I had the others—on sight.

Carmichael had a most obnoxious hobby: playing solos on the C Melody saxophone. He also liked poetry but this did not redeem him in my mind.

I can remember lying in my big featherbed with the apostle pattern quilt and hearing the flat, unpleasant sound of Carmichael's saxophone downstairs, but that was not the worst of it. After a while I would hear the dreadful sound of his intruder's voice as he and Owen took turns reading aloud to each other from one of Morgan's ancient, precious dogeared books of poetry (Genuine tooled leather books, mind you)—this, seeming to me, the most faithless of infidelites on Owen's part. Imagine. Morgan's very prize possession—his 1665 Quarto Macbeth—being shared with this outlander, this hideous invader.

I came downstairs crying, saying dreadful, angry, unkind things and then threw up my good supper on Owen's prize hand-hooked rug. And then fainted. Owen bade Carmichael good night and carried me up to bed.

O, I know—I was a quite rotten-spoiled little boy, as you can plainly see. My ego was bigger than the Universe, it outdistanced the light-years of the farthest stars. I was cruel.

I was, for example, constantly carving my initials in the bark of friendly old trees with my Barlow Brand pocket knife—really it had been my dead dad Morgan's.

L.D.T.—that was the abbreviation of my rather lengthy Christian name, which was Lewellyn Delaplaine Tiphany.

It would, of course, have taken me many summers to inscribe all of the monicker in perhaps twenty or thirty elms and oaks and sugar maples and birches.

L.D.T.! L.D.T.!

In furious apostrophe, with insane reiteration, like some obsessed infant pioneer blazing his way through the forest primeval, I wandered among the tree trunks in the thick woods above

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our house—cruelly whittling those letters into the tender, green-bleeding flesh of trees, so venerable that I knew, even as I did it, that they felt the keen agony of my knife in flesh that had taken root before even Morgan, and certainly Owen, who was only twenty-five, had been born.

But what did "born" mean?

I knew for example that I was born in 1919. This was 1926. I had that much fact gripped clammily in my little, knotted kidfist.

But *how* had I been born?

Particularly, in view of that really cabbageless rose garden with which—in desparate loneliness—Owen had made a kind of devout, green covenant.

O, after the episode with Carmichael, I whittled the initials of my name even more furiously—leaving sighing, green-bleeding forest titans in my wake.

And I developed, at about the same time, an unaccountable and quite mysterious taste for the company of girls who were mostly my age, lived thereabouts in the river valley farms or in the town of Glory, but who—in the case of Crispy Lemons, at least—were a year older than I.

Some clew seeded deep in my racial mind whispered to me that one of these fatuous little sweet-smelling creatures might somehow possess the secret after which my heart most ardently yearned.

As you may infer, I had had perhaps a half-dozen girl friends that winter and spring, but I had finally focused all my mental energies on Crispy Lemons, as being the most likely to tell me the truth.

Crispy was a soft, yellow-haired child who acted shy on first meeting but who, on closer acquaintance, turned out to be acerbically—almost boyishly—outspoken and candid.

We were sitting barefoot one May morning, letting the cold, springwater brook gush achingly over our poor blue toes—trying to see who could outlast the other in this really agonizing test of wills. At last a stick which looked alarmingly like a copperhead had scared us back into our socks and shoes.

I bet you don't know where babies come from, I said, trying to be worldly and casual and therefore not letting Crispy see my face.

Bet I do so, she said.

Where?

You tell me, Lewellyn.

From under a cabbage leaf, I said, and instantly was sorry for it.

Pooh, said Crispy Lemons. That is the green lie which all mothers and fathers tell little tiny kids.

I'm not a tiny kid, Crispy! I shouted. And besides—even if I were—Owen would never lie to me. Babies do so come from under cabbage leaves.

They don't.

They do.

Don't.

Do!

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Don't!

I punched her on the shoulder—not really hard, just girl-hard.

Her large blue eyes snapped and she punched me back.

Boyhard.

I bit my lip, averting my face again, so that she could not see how her punch had hurt.

Well, if you know so dingdam much, I shouted. Where *do* they come from then?

She was still a moment, as if weighing in her little, yellow cotton-candy head whether or not I deserved the truth. And then — in a completely calm clear high and unaffected little female voice she explained the whole reproductive process to me. It took her perhaps four and a half minutes.

When Crispy had finished I just sat there like a horrified toad: my mind reeling, my senses fainting, the most searing feelings of disbelief and revulsion sweeping through me. The idea of such activities occurring between Morgan and Owen or—God forbid—Owen and Carmichael simply flattened me out.

Unfortunately, for the occasion, I thought suddenly of Morgan's choicest word of derision.

Poppycock! I shrilled and pounded off down the dusty road for home.

Off on the breeze which blew from Glory, I could hear the faint, plaintive sound of Carmichael's C Melody horn: he was playing *None But the Lonely Heart*. Playing it sourly, badly. But that is not the worst of it. When I stole up behind Owen in the kitchen making slaw for supper, I could hear her sweet, soprano humming along with him.

I retreated even more into my solitude that spring. I gave up Crispy Lemons. I gave up all girls except Owen. Forever. Forever. Not one of them could be trusted if Crispy Lemons was any sample.

One morning in May of that fateful year—a morning when the wind had never seemed so eternally green—Owen had led me out to the edge of her rose garden and pointed to a small plot about a hundred feet square which Mr. Jack Lemons (hateful Crispy's old grandfather) had spaded up and fertilized that very morning. Owen spread her slim, pretty fingers like an Aegean empress and swept them elegantly in the direction of this little plot.

Lewellyn darling, she said then. You're spending entirely too much of your time alone. For a while I didn't worry—you seemed to find such pleasant friendship with the little Lemons child. What happened to her? You seemed so interested, dear.

She lies, I said through grated teeth. You wouldn't believe the cock-and-bull tale she told me.

Well, no matter, said Owen. Here is something to keep you pleasantly occupied from now till autumn.

I stared at the clods of fresh-turned black bottom-land earth. I smelled the reek of fresh bonemeal.

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It's yours, Lewellyn, said Owen then.

But, Owen, I said. It's nothing but dirt.

No, Lewellyn, it's something more beautiful than that.

Well, what is it, Owen?

It's the Secret of Life, said Owen, softly.

What do you *mean*, Owen?

It's a little garden—or soon will be. *Your* garden, Lewy—your very *own*. It is your first lesson about where babies come from.

Couldn't you let me have all the lessons all at once? I asked softly.

No, she said. Everything in its proper order.

My mind was whirring like a tiny, furious clock: I sucked my finger distastefully, but curious, as I surveyed the ugly plot of fresh-turned earth.

Now we're going to hop into Morgan's Pierce Arrow and drive into Glory—to Carmichael's greenhouse, Owen announced, making me spit into my clean pocket kerchief so she could mop some Tootsie Roll chocolate from my cheek. Carmichael has every conceivable variety of flower. There you may choose. We'll bring the flower plants home. Or perhaps you'll choose seeds. Together we will plant them. And from this day on, the garden is yours, your responsibility, your chore, your duty. And, I might add, your infinite pleasure. Morgan and I possessed the Green Thumb and there's no reason why you can't acquire one, too.

The Green Thumb, Owen?

Yes, she said. The ability to plant a seed and create a new life.

I turned my back to her so she would not perceive the excitement in my face. Then a troubling thought entered my mind.

I looked anxiously into Owen's smiling, concerned face.

I suppose you're planning to ask Carmichael home for lunch with us.

Well, we are having bacon, lettuce, tomato and sweet-pickle sandwiches, she said, looking even more troubled. And they happen to be Carmichael's favorite as well as yours.

Oh, all right, I sighed.

Lewellyn, darling, what is it? You look simply awful.

Oh, nothing, I sighed histrionically and looked dramatically the other way, wringing my little hands like Zasu Pitts in the moving picture shows.

Owen did her best to look severe but I could see she was only fighting back tears.

Lewellyn, you must *stop* this driving away my friends! I have a right to *my* life too. That's one reason you simply must make a go of this garden. And get your mind away from things beyond your years.

In a moment we were there. I could hear Carmichael practicing scales on his saxophone back behind a great array of begonias and phlox and rather foolish-looking ferns.

I breathed in the green, green

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greenhouse smells: the dusty, gold smell of nasturtiums and the red waxy smell of tulips and the fatal, feral, rank smell of the bonemeal. But, damn it all, there was another smell in that glassed-in prison: there was the smell of Romance for Owen.

Now, said Owen, bending over me while the hateful Carmichael flashed a gold tooth and leered cheekily through rimless glasses down the neck of Owen's low-cut, black shantung dress. Now, Lewellyn, she went on, adjusting the rope of cultured pearls between the tops of her bosoms. Now, dear, I want you to choose. Tell Carmichael whether you have selected pansies or hollyhocks, dahlias or sunflowers, iris or begonias, impatiens or bachelor's buttons. Or maybe you'd like a smattering of several—so you can have an original garden of your own creation. Stop scratching your blesseds, Lewellyn, and consider.

I glared at Carmichael. I stopped scratching. Blesseds was Owen's pet name for my behind.

I've decided, I said.

Yes, dear.

Cabbages.

There was a short, prescient pause.

Cabbages, Lewellyn?

Yes, Owen.

A whole hundred-square-foot garden—of *nothing* but *cabbages*?

Yes.

Don't you like flowers, Lewellyn?

No offense meant, Mum, but frankly they smell like girls.

Carmichael snickered obnoxiously. I glared and began scratching my blesseds again.

Well, Owen—bless her and keep her memory ever green—she agreed at last and we watched while Carmichael stacked the two hundred little boxes with the tender, nodding green cabbage plants in the back of Morgan's old Pierce Arrow. After Owen had paid him, Carmichael placed his hairy hand on Owen's small, thin arm.

Tonight, dear lady, he crooned in the offensive and unctuous manner of Jack La Rue, the movie actor. Tonight there is a marvelous new Doug Fairbanks film at the Strand Theater. *The Black Pirate*. I was wondering if you and your charming little boy would consider being my guests.

At my very first groan Owen's poor eyes flew to my face. I clutched my chest and staggered against the running board.

What is it, Lewellyn? cried Owen.

It's here, Owen, I gasped. In my chest.

In your chest, love. Oh, tell mother where!

It's appendicitis, I said. For sure, Owen. Oh, do take me home, Owen!

Owen looked cross—cross but still worried. I was a powerful, though flawed, little actor in those days.

Well, I certainly won't take you home if you have appendicitis, Lewellyn. And besides you don't get appendicitis in the chest.

I tried to adjust my clutching, claw-

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ing hands a little lower, toward any other anatomical area, but I knew I had bungled it.

Owen was crying as she packed me into the car and we drove silently down the river road for home, the faint, sweet, acrid smell of the young cabbage plants stirring gently in the green wind.

We had a really delicious lunch of bacon, lettuce, tomato and sweet-pickle sandwiches with some of Owen's fresh-baked bread and the home-made mayonnaise which Morgan used to love so. And not alone Morgan.

And, from that green morning on, Owen never had another mortal lover.

Carmichael drove past the house in his Whippet a few times afterwards in the evening sundowns, gazing forlornly into the cheery, curtained windows of the house for some glimpse of poor Owen. He even parked a half-mile down the river road under the willows a couple of soft nights in a row and played *Ain't She Sweet* on his C Melody sax. But he soon gave up. He never called Owen again.

And I? Well, I was too busy, too infernally, savagely occupied with the tending of my cabbages to care one way or the other whether Owen lived or died.

My dead dad Morgan was a Mystic. I think he was even, perhaps, secretly, a Druid Magician. Until his death when I was five he had crammed my young, eager, mischievous mind with but one certainty and it was this: That the Human Imagination is the most potent force in the entire Universe.

He read me Blake and Marvell and Milton and Shakespeare when I was four, and I swear I understood *Midsummer Night's Dream* and "To His Coy Mistress" better then than now.

Some soft nights, in that strange benighted springtime with its strange impression that even the stars and moon were green and growing things in the great garden of the skies—sometimes in those green, green nights I would lie swaddled and sweating in my goose down and quilts and hear Morgan's sweet, deep voice reciting what was for me the most unforgettable of all the Bard's enchanted stories:

I pull in Resolution, and begin
To doubt the Equivocation of the Fiend,
That lies like truth. Feare not, till Byrnane Wood
Do come to Dunsinane, and now a Wood
Comes toward Dunsinane.
Moving trees, sir? I would ask, gapejawed at this image.
Yes, boy.
Walking trees, sir?

A whole forest of them, Lewy, he would say, whilst the hairs stood up on the back of my neck. Trees that can think and speak and walk—and *more.*

With the "more" his voice fell to a whisper.

I never dared ask Morgan what the "more" might be. I could surely guess.

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By the time Morgan went away he had built in me a powerful imagination. As you shall presently see for yourself. For there was the matter of Owen's Green Lie. You see, I had determined, through my Imagination, to make it happen just as she said. I made up my mind that the Green Lie would become Truth.

I took to creeping down the staircase and opening the big front door with its green brass latch and its great green key—opening the great front door, I say, and stealing out to the edge of my moonlit garden to urge my green wards on. O, I swear they were no ordinary cabbages when I was through.

When the sickle of the new May moon lay cupped in heaven's saffron and lavender robes, I prayed pagan prayers. I have forgotten them now but I know they were pagan, ancient, devilish, druid things I said to those cabbages.

The land was a great, moonlit arena.

Far off on the knoll above the river pasture the trees gestured frantically to me in the breathless light. I swear there was no wind from river or from hill. And yet I could see the green fingers of the poplars and oaks and sycamores gesturing like the green fingers of Stonehenge priests in the blue dust of the moon and stars, in green and ancient rite.

Owen was always a sound sleeper. She never caught me out there. And would she have objected? Perhaps not. Hadn't she wanted me to care so passionately about my little garden?

Well, she had had her wish. I was a soul obsessed. I remember how swiftly the little green things grew. I remember how huge they looked as they lay open in the moonlight, like green great roses themselves. And I was constantly checking under the larger leaves for some sign of my new sibling.

And, beyond the shimmering, lustrous river meadow, the great trees gestured at me. I remembered the Barlow knife and the green bleeding initials. Was I not perhaps misinterpreting those green gesturing fingers against the splattering stars? Were they perhaps not reaching out to me in seething, sylvan anger or leafy vengeance?

At the thought the wind rose and then fell and the air was more utterly motionless than before.

I stared at the skyline. The tossing boughs suddenly draped down in immobile verdure—as if the trees were—well, *listening*. But listening for what? Perhaps, I thought, they were listening for some—well, some *signal*. But some signal to do what? I dared not even frame the answer in my mind.

That was when I heard the green voice.

Startled out of my reverie, I turned my gaze toward the house, thinking the voice might have originated there, on the vine covered verandah, or even the back porch. Perhaps the despised

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Carmichael had returned like a thief in the night with his Whippet and sax to steal my Owen away.

A quick breeze ruffled the moon-clad meadows and then died. The green frogs skritched and sawed like small green madmen in the bogs: their strident, gendered voices insane with love and love alone. Though I knew not yet Love's tunes.

And then the voice spoke again. And I knew it was near the tips of my naked toes, from the cabbage patch, indeed from beneath that largest, leafiest plant just there. I squatted and peered timorously underneath.

H-honey? I whispered in a squeaky voice. Are you there, dear?

I could see him and at the same time I could not quite make him out. I could see enough of him to know that he had a shaggy, green form, and the glint was there, plain enough, of one green twinkle which I supposed came from his wicked, wanton eye.

Honey? I whispered again.

I wish you wouldn't call me that, he said. It sounds patronizing.

Hello, sir, I said then. What's your name?

Udu, said the voice.

Udu, I said carefully, slowly, loving the sound of it. Udu.

I am your servant, Lewellyn. Yours to command—until—

Until what, honey? I whispered, shivering as with an ague and knowing as little what "ague" meant than what was the meaning of "patronizing."

I could see the bright glint of the green eye, under the leaf, in the deep green shadowed space between the largest plant's lower leaves and the clods of dark, manured earth.

Until what? I whispered again.

Until there comes the next night of the old of the moon—on Midsummer Night's Eve— and then—

He had a great sense of drama and suspense and I loved that. Though I was shivering almost too hard to speak.

Then what? I whispered.

Then the green bridegroom comes to claim the green bride, was the strange, green soft reply. And the Green Score will be evened.

I let out a loud squeak and ran all the way back to the house and slammed the great door without even bothering to latch or lock it. I crouched at my windowsill staring down at the moonlit yard and, in the distance, the furious little cabbage patch. Was it my tormented fancy or could I hear the pipes of infernal Pan spinning broken-golden notes out into the loose light? Or was it not more likely—windborne from Glory—the sound of poor, love-sick Carmichael and his saxaphone?

I woke Owen then—really quite ill—and stayed in her own bed all that day with piles of Morgan's books for company and with poor Owen racing up and down the staircase with things to heal or tempt my palate. I tried to occupy my mind with my stamp and coin collection. I tried to decipher old

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meanings, once evident to me, in Morgan's glorious blind-tooled leather books.

And I said nary word to Owen about Udu.

I waited a whole week of nights before returning to the patch.

The moonlight was so brilliant that night that it was almost audible. I had checked in one of Morgan's old almanacks and found out that Midsummer Night's Eve was two nights hence—the twenty-first of June— a Friday. What would happen on that crystal green night—what events? Who was the Green Bridegroom who would come? Who the Green Bride? What would be the evening of the Green Score?

I shivered: I could never recollect having been braver.

Where have you been, Lewellyn? asked the voice when I reached the place again.

I—I have been ill—very ill, Udu.

Well, there's nothing for illness better than hot cabbage soup, was the reply. How are you now?

B-better, sir—I mean, honey, I replied.

And how is *she?* asked the voice of Udu then, and that voice seemed to have deepened and coarsened somehow in those seven elapsed nights.

How is who, please, honey?

How is *she*—the green bride to be?

Wh-what bride, honey? Is someone getting married around here? I said, nervously.

Never mind," said Udu rather perfunctorily I thought. There are only two more sleeps to go.

Two more sleeps till what?

Oh, you shall learn well—when yonder lady moon droops tired and old and thin. You'll soon learn the Green Lesson, sire.

I slept badly the next two nights. On Midsummer Night's Eve I stayed up until the moon was in the Royal Pawlonia tree. Late. I tried to occupy my mind on my nursery floor with the little scuffed legions of lead soldiers which had been Morgan's and Morgan's dad's and his dad's dad's before him. They stood crouched and glaring in the painted, frozen gestures of old forgotten holy causes on the moonlit carpet.

The house was utterly silent. Even the clocks seemed to be holding their brassy breaths.

The moonlight was faint and silky now— a light which created most desperate conjectures, which conjured up the most frightening conundrums out of the shadows it cast. I would have sworn that night there were green tigers and green grizzlies and green dragons abroad in the river meadows.

But this was merely fancy. The green reality was waiting in the green wings, like a green actor, for its cue. The concept was no mere child's fancy either—it was solid green Imagination.

Through the tidy gingham curtains which fluttered in the bedroom window I could make out the shape of the

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old, wild moon—a chip of whittled silver in the bole of the huge, leafy Royal Pawlonia which grew by the verandah. The air was sheer madness with the green cries of the little peepers in the flats: their thin green voices shivering with hints of unspeakable Joy.

I peered, blinked, rubbed my eyes and peered again. Was I able to believe my eyes?

Yes. I could see him quite clearly—beyond the green hedges of barberry and yew trees at the lawn's fringes.

He was, to my child's eye, simply enormous—Lord, he was big as ever Morgan had been and that's an inch over six feet.

He was standing with his green feet set apart in the lawn, his green fists on green hips, his green eyes flashing in the face of subtle chartreuse which he flung back to the fainting moon. I saw the flash of bright green teeth as he laughed.

I have grown up, Lewellyn, he said.

Did I make you grow up, honey? I gasped, my knuckles white where they clutched the sill.

Your Imagination did. Strongest power in the world.

He laughed—a green, rather terrible laugh.

And now the Hour is nearly nigh.

What hour, deary, honey mine?

The Hour of Green Reckoning, was the chilling answer.

And he turned then, like a hunter calling in his hounds, and halloed softly, mysteriously, between his green fingers, through the moonlight toward the motionless line of trees upon the knoll.

I swear his voice was soft and melodious as wind would have been. But there was no wind. There was only the aching Romance of the screaming little green lovers in the bog: riotous and urgent with a green and reptilian sexuality with which I was not yet familiar.

That was when part of the scene—well, *shifted* so to speak. I mean, I had the sudden illusion that the whole hill above Little Grace Creek was suddenly involved in a most enormous landslide: And I sweated at the spectacle.

But, no—it was not the hill which was moving down toward our house—it was the line of trees which had begun moving. And once again the highest reaches of their leafy boughs were gesturing madly in the moonshine.

Oh, I had the sudden impulse to fetch that Barlow knife out of my Chest of Things and hide it under the Persian carpet by my bed. Or perhaps I would even run with it to the back hall window and drop it twinkling into the ash bin below. For I had hurt these trees—these very trees.

I could hear as well as see them now: a low susurration and the crash of boughs amingling: the angry switch of leafy branches and snapping twigs like the thin toes of green ogres.

They moved, I saw with growing horror, upon roots which they had eas-

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ed and wriggled up out of the earth at Udu's clamorous summons. I could see how complex and intricate the lace of these systems was as they crawled cumbersomely along bearing the trees' great weight and sometimes splintering and sending up little puffs of dry dirt all round, as they came—like the snakes of great Medusa's hair—a-writhing down the rock and cow pie-studded pasture toward our lawn.

Heavens, was my thought. Let Dunsinane soon disclose for poor Owen at least a hiding place from Byrnane wood. For suddenly, and for no real reason, I felt a threat against my darling young mother more than against myself.

Amid the twisting, crawling white roots I could see clods of fresh earth, still moist and dark and secret and, tumbling out now and then and twisting like tiny snakes, were the uprooted earthworms and late spring grubs and even some Indian arrowheads.

The symphony of frog lust reached new intensities—now the whole river valley, washed dimly in the silvering luminescence of the expiring moon, seemed racketing with this hot, erotic bid. And weaving in and out of it in sinister green counterpoint was the strange wordless song—savage and cosmic and coarse—which was the song Udu was singing as if urging the invaders even closer, and then as I watched, in utmost terror, I saw the great forest giants gather themselves and come on even faster.

Udu's shape was like a silhouette cut out of heavy green paper—only it was three dimensional. And the leaf of poplar and silver maple caught wisps of moonlight and glittered in the great green common face of the forest like eyes which glared.

Now I smelled Owen's body—fresh and still damp with the cologne of her evening bath. She had come up behind me. I felt her small fingers on my shoulder.

O, Lewellyn, she sighed, watching the green army's approach and hearing the splinter and slither and grumble of it like the sound of someone moving huge furniture about in a nearby room. O, Lewy love, now I fear you've gone and done it.

Owen, I never *knew*, I sobbed, clutching both arms around her slender waist. I never *thought*. I never even *imagined*.

O, yes, lovey, she said. You *imagined*. That's what made it all happen. O, my poor little orphaned boy. What will become of you?

Orphaned? I cried. Owen, don't talk like that. O, Owen, make them go back up the hill. Make them slide their scary roots back in the ground and go back to leafy dreams!

Owen stroked my damp forehead, smiling and shaking her head.

What a curse it is, she whispered as if to herself. To have the child of a poet. A very great poet, I am afraid.

Owen, it's I they want, I said, trying to be valiant and not even knowing

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where to begin. I cut letters in the bark of them. I hurt them, Owen. I made them bleed green blood. It's I they want—not you. O, Owen, please don't let them take me.

I shan't, my darling, murmured my brave mother and rose and raced from the room in her little bare feet and out and down the hallway and down the stairs two at a time, and then I could hear the chattering talk of the green key in the lock, and she was out into the green night, leaving no other inhabitants in the world, it seemed, but me and total terror.

Owen, no! I shouted, bereft. O, Owen, do come back.

But she was gone and suddenly everything in Time was a moment too late and Owen was only a small sliver of white chiffon down in the green well of dark and then became a fleeing, screaming little angel as Udu turned, saw her and swept down toward her across the lawn, among the stone nymphs and bird bath and croquet wickets and, with a great green shout, enveloped poor Owen utterly.

I could hear her screams then.

And the green phalanx, the jagged green juggernaut had come another fifty feet down the sward: I heard the groan and splinter of the crashing white picket fences which bordered our house as they came rumbling and swishing on: these gigantic pumps, these huge oxygen factories coming inexorably on.

Owen's screams told me that Udu had borne her back into the house and was, even now, bearing her up the stifled, muffled, deep-shadowed stairwell to her room. I knew nothing of Rape's meaning back in those boying times—knew not, that is, till then.

The door to Owen's bedroom crashed open, and I heard the carpet tear as the heavy green thunder of Udu's feet fell harsh and set the very housebeams to groaning. I think Owen fainted then—in his arms she grew still. I knew he had not killed her and rather than this I wished he had.

Down in the yard the gazebo went down in shivering disaster and the trees came in.

Then I heard a deep green sigh—and I swear to you it was not wind—from the dew-glistening branches. They paused and seemed to lean, as if wind pressed, toward the open window to Owen's bedroom.

From that window—and filling the house now—came her shouts. No, they were not screams—they were *shouts*. And they terrified me the more, I think, because they were not shouts of pain but shouts of greatest pleasure.

I was bewildered beyond my power to tell of it.

For many moments Owen's voice rose and fell, and that voice—above the din of the trees splintering up the front porch—that voice was redly tinted with the most sublime of ecstacies.

What was I to think?

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What was taking place between Owen and the green monster? And I swear again that her cries of pain or even death throes could not have dismayed me more than these outcries of supreme soprano Joy.

I heard the great roots scratching for purchase and the drumlike boles of the young trees clashing against each other as they stormed and breached our threshold. I heard them on the staircase and I heard the crash and splinter of the banisters as the heavy — and sad to say, whittled — bark of elm and oak and poplar pressed them out and shattered them.

I fainted then, falling against the sill, and did not revive for several moments. When I did I felt twigs writhing round my wrists and twigs writhing round my ankles and waist and shoulders and great green-reeking boughs pressing me back on the carpet by my window, and I could taste bitter young June leaves in my teeth.

They were heavy on me—and wet —and green—O, so green!

And Owen's voice was heard no more.

I struggled like a drowner in this green sea which enveloped me from head to toe. I writhed and tossed in my half-swooning wits and tried to free my hands and legs from the vinelike vises which restrained them.

O, Owen, are you dead? I wailed and struggled even harder, thinking—too late—more of her than of my own safety.

There was the harsh green smell of them in the room: the green, green smell of them, oozing sap here and there among their bruised boughs and boles which sweated as from huge effort.

And the green frogs were still. It was as if Owen's ecstacies had shamed them.

Owen, forgive me!

I cried it even as I felt the cloth of my flannel pajamas rip and an instant later winced as the sharpness of a pocket knife—or perhaps only a great rugged thorn—began scoring its way across my flinching chest.

What were they doing to me? Perhaps they would cut my heart out—well, I deserved no less! O, these trees were surely about to exact some dark, scarlet tribute from me for the anguish they endured from mortal woodsmen and mortal sawmills, even as much as vengeance for my own little whittled meannesses.

I fell back and hardly felt the pain in the flesh of my bleeding chest so anguished was my heart for the silent Owen.

Then, as suddenly as they had seized me, I was released. They fell back from me with a great whoosh of tossing boughs, and I crawled, naked and bleeding, across the torn and ragged floor to the threshold to the hallway. Even as I watched, Udu oozed across the threshold from Owen's boudoir. He strode to the top of the stairwell and beckoned down it, snapping his

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green fingers sharp as a ringmaster's whip. I could see the wink of the stairlamp on one or the other of his bright green eyes, now quick as a madman's flash. He was beckoning to some new contingent of the leafy army—six river willows they were, and they scrabbled and crawled up the steps, their green hair tossing with mad effort.

And they bore some sort of strange tree litter between them, like six or eight pallbearers going to claim a body, with Udu dancing like Pan himself to lead the way back into Owen's silent bedroom. I bit my fist like a tart apple and wept. I knew all too well what they were about to bear away, back to earth again.

Though I was quite wrong.

They came back soon, with Udu leading, his green fingers snapping in the cold, white light of the gas flame which bubbled on its pipe by the doorway, as he beckoned them back down the stairway.

I crawled close in the watery light of the Wellsbach flame on the scarred wall. The willows, groaning, bore the tree litter down and away.

But Owen was not on it.

I darted between small trunks and stared wildly into Owen's shambled bedroom.

She was not there. There was no sign of her.

Filmy scraps of her torn nightdress lay shredded round the rug.

But she was not there. Nor was her dear body. I ran back, glaring down the stairwell.

Like green chanting priests in some sea-deep green cathedral, the river willows bore the litter between them through the shambles of the downstairs hallway where family portraits watched in frescoes of dismay. Then they moved out past the splintered great front door and into the moonlight.

In that faint wash of illumination, vagrant and burned here and there by darkling fireflies, I could see quite plainly what was the litter's sweet burden.

It was a dear little apple tree—fairly fainting with blossoms of fruit-promise and of soon harvest. It exhaled a fragrance which drove suddenly from my nose, in a sudden delicious wave, all memories of Owen's bath cologne or, even it seemed, of that fragrance which was always hers whenever.

My chest still hurt terribly from the wounds inflicted upon it by the trees.

They healed in time—those scars. But they are scored deep and white into the flesh and sinew of my chest even yet....

It has been a tough decade or so since then. Aunts and great-aunts—and even one whiskered great-grandaunt whose name was Lispy Lamb and who smelled like Creme de Menthe and SenSen and wrote loveletters to Billy Sunday—I was their ward.

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It would be easy to say to you that Owen was seen no more on earth. But that would be a Green Lie, too.

Up on the knoll above where Little Grace Creek turns into the great and green Ohio, where the raincrows utter their low, fluty gossips in summer dusks, and where the great campfire sunsets kindle all the western reaches, up there stands a young oak tree with wren nests in his head—a tree never seen before that night in that place.

But that is not all.

That oak tree towers protectively over a smaller and even more lustrous little tree.

An apple tree.

And it, too, had never been known before in that place.

And when the squawls of summer rain and lightning flash and lash the land, the oak tree protects the little apple tree. In January, he takes loads of snow in his boughs—snow that would melt to icicle and press and break the boughs of the slender little apple tree.

They love each other, these two.

O, yes, I am sure of that.

She loves.

He loves.

I have seen them together far too often in nights of owl-talking moon not to know.

The other queen of my story—she thinks so, too, but she likes to argue and teases me sometimes that it was all something quite different that happened in that long-ago midsummer night.

She argues with me about it when we go down to the cool river on hot August nights and bathe naked with our one-year-old child Morgan IV and then go back to the old house and feed him his apple sauce and then tuck him in.

After which we two go back up on the knoll, in the moonshine, under the shelter of both little apple tree and brave young oak and make wild love amid the Queen Anne's lace and red clover and lady's-slipper.

Afterwards, my young queen (she is twenty now; I am a year younger) with the tip of her pretty, clever finger traces the curious scar—that raised white cicatrice, pale as butcher's twine against the tanned shine of my chest—she traces the words and smiles.

Then she reads the legend aloud:

UDU LOVES OWEN—JUNE 1926

Well, it seems only fair, I say lightly. I carved such things in their flesh. Don't you think history has been waiting all these thousands of years for a tree cunning enough to carve its initials in a boy?

But who was Udu? my queen will ask, though she knows very well.

And again I tell her this story which I am telling you: that story of the Green Reckoning and the things that occurred that Midsummer Night's Eve in 1926. And her eyes crinkle and she bends in laughter, her pretty breasts bobbling like soft apples in the firefly-scorched nights, and the moonlight glowing lustrous on the bright, dark V between her long legs—like an arrow-

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head carved in charcoal.

You just *imagine* that's what happened, Lewy. You know that's not the way it was at all.

Then where, please, is Owen all this time?

Poor darling, she ran away with Carmichael, the greenhouse keeper. It's a well-known story around the town of Glory, Lewellyn—even a dozen years later. And don't color up and frown so, dear. It's nothing for you to be ashamed of. We all destroy our parents in the end. Use them up, grind them, digest and burn them up. And out of the phoenix funeral pyre we create new life. If we don't—we are sunk. If we cling to our parents—despite life's bidings—they shall destroy us. It's one way or the other. So don't worry about dear Owen, your mother. Don't, love. And as for the little trees? Well, they do love one another, I agree. But that's all. It means nothing—nothing, honey mine!

No, I said. You're wrong, lovey! Owen didn't run away with Carmichael. She did not, I say.

She did.

Didn't.

Did.

Didn't!

And that is when I punch my darling Crispy Lemons on the arm.

Not boy-hard.

Just girl-hard.

And she laughs and hits me back and pulls me on top of her and we fall back fainting and laughing with love among her tawny hair—among the wildflowers, too.

While over our sappy, happy heads—above our shameless passion and Joy, two trees look laughing down: the green oak and the tinted, tiny apple tree whose branches fairly smoke, even in sear stark winter, with living, livid blossoms.

This year, heart disease and stroke will kill another 200,000 Americans before age 65.

Put your money where your Heart is.

American Heart Association

WE'RE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE

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Bob Shaw ("Well Wisher," November 1979) returns with an engaging and not entirely serious tale about Arthur Bryant's search for an alternate reality that suits his modest and strange talent.

Go On, Pick A Universe!

BY
BOB SHAW

The shop, which was about a hundred yards off Fifth Avenue, was so discreet as to be almost invisible. Its single front window was blanked by heavy drapes, and down in one corner it bore small bronze letters which said ALTEREALITIES INC. The peach-colored light from within was so subdued that, even in the gathering darkness of a December afternoon, it was difficult to be sure the place was open for business.

Arthur Bryant hesitated for a moment on the sidewalk, trying to overcome his nervousness, then opened the door and went in.

"Good afternoon, sir—may I help you?" The speaker was a swarthy young man with slaty jowls and a dark business suit that had an expensive silkiness to it. He was seated at a large desk on which was a nameplate proclaiming him to be one T.D. Marzian, Branch Manager.

"Ah...I'd like some information," Bryant said, taking in his surroundings with some interest. A plump girl with cropped brown hair was seated nearby at a smaller desk. The ambience was one of deep carpet, hessian walls and intimate whispers of music. The only item which distinguished the place from a thousand other plushy front offices was a silvery disk about the size of a manhole cover which occupied an area of carpet behind the two desks.

"Glad to be of service," Marzian said. "What would you like to know?"

Bryant cleared his throat. "Can you really transfer people into other universes? Universes where things are different?"

"We do it all the time—that's our business." Marzian's jowls parted to make room for an easy, reassuring smile. "All a client has to do is specify

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his ideal conditions, and—provided they are not *so* preposterous that they can't exist anywhere in the multitude of alternate realities—we relocate him in the universe of his dreams. Our Probability Redistributor operates instantaneously, painlessly and with total reliability."

"It sounds marvelous," Bryant breathed.

Marzian nodded. "It *is* marvelous—well worth every cent of the fee. What sort of reality parameters did you have in mind?"

Bryant glanced in the direction of the plump girl, turned his back to her and lowered his voice. "Do you think...? Would it be possible...?"

"There's no need to be embarrassed, sir—we have a lot of experience in meeting customers' various personal requirements, and our service is absolutely confidential."

"I was wondering," Bryant mumbled, "if you could transfer me to a reality in which...er...I had the most perfectly developed physique in the world?" His diffidence was caused by the fact that he was five-four in his shoes and had no other dimensions that he cared to discuss. He waited, enduring the other man's scrutiny, half-expecting a look of derision—but Marzian appeared to be in no way amused or perturbed.

"We most certainly could—no problem whatsoever." Marzian spoke with breezy confidence. "You know, for a moment you almost had me convinced you were going to ask for something difficult."

Byrant experienced a pang of purest joy. Until that moment he had not really dared believe that his dream could be fulfilled anywhere in the multiple-probability universes, but now he could begin planning the sort of life he would enjoy as an adulated superman. *I'll have five different women every day for a month,* he thought, *just to break the new body in. Then I'll settle down to a life of moderation — maybe only two or three women a day....*

"There is just the matter of the fee," Marzian was saying. "A hundred thousand dollars may seem a lot, but the cost of installing and running the Probability Redistributor is astronomical—and the fee does cover our unique Triple Chance facility. What it amounts to is that, if necessary, you get up to three transfers for the price of one."

"Huh?" Bryant's old doubts were reawakened. "Why should...? Does that mean something can go wrong?"

Marzian laughed indulgently. "The Probability Redistributor *never* goes wrong, sir, but we provide the Triple Chance facility so that each client can select a reality which *exactly* matches his requirements. On the rare occasions when a problem arises, it is usually because the specification was incomplete or too vague."

"I see." Bryant tilted his head, frowning. "Or do I?"

Marzian spread his hands. "Well,

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suppose you were a poker fanatic and you asked to be relocated in a reality where everything—social status included—was dictated by skill in poker. When you got there you might find that the inhabitants of that universe played nothing but five-card draw, whereas your strong point was seven-card stud. That wouldn't be very satisfactory from your point of view, but all you would have to do would be to press the button on your handy pocket-sized Probability Normalizer, and it would instantly return you to this reality. Under the terms of our Triple Chance clause you would be entitled to a free transfer to a clearly specified universe where seven-card stud was the thing, and you would live happily ever after and Alterealities Incorporated would have yet another satisfied client."

Bryant's brow cleared. "Nothing could be fairer than that! When can I go?"

"Almost immediately, sir. As soon as...." Marzian gave a polite but significant cough.

"There's no need to worry about the money side of it," Bryant said buoyantly. "I've got just over a hundred thou in my account. Mind you, I had to sell everything I owned to get it, but what the hell! The way I see it, if I'm not going to be back in this reality, I might as well...." He broke off as he noted the pained expression which had appeared on Marzian's face.

"If you would care to speak to Miss Cruft, she will deal with all the necessary formalities," Marzian said, sweeping one hand in the direction of the plump girl's desk. "In the meantime I will activate and calibrate the Probability Redistributor." He sat down at his own larger desk, which to Bryant's eyes now had something of the appearance of a console, and started clicking switches.

"Of course," Bryant said in an apologetic voice, sensing that the branch manager—as a professional rearranger of probabilities—was above concerning himself with the vulgar commercial details of the business. When he approached Miss Cruft her smile was sympathetic, and unexpectedly pleasant, but Bryant scarcely registered the fact. His thoughts were already turning to the lissome, long-thighed beauties who would be clamoring for his favors when he was the most perfectly developed man in the world. He established his identity and credit rating, made a computerized transfer of funds, and signed contractual papers in a haze of pleasurable anticipation.

"Here's your Probability Normalizer," Marzian said, handing him an object like a cigarette case with a press button in the center of one side. "Now, if you would like to stand on the probability focus plate...."

Bryant obediently stepped onto the floor-mounted silver disk and watched Marzian rotate knobs and tap keys on panels that were let into his desk. At

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the conclusion of the ritual, Marzian reached for a red button which was larger than all the others. Bryant had time for one pang of wonderment and apprehension at the idea of being propelled into an alternate universe—then Marzian and Miss Cruft and all their familiar surroundings were gone.

He was standing in a vast, green-tiled plaza which was rimmed with egg-shaped buildings. Here and there were potted palms which swayed continuously despite the absence of any breeze, and the sun appeared to have spiral offshoots like a frozen Catherine wheel, but Bryant had no thought to spare for external marvels. First on the list of priorities was the checking out of his brand-new superbody; then would come a few weeks of silken dalliance; then perhaps he would get round to nature studies.

He looked down at himself—and emitted a bleat of anguish.

His physique had not changed in any way!

Whimpering with disappointment, he pulled off his jacket and shirt and confirmed the awful discovery that his body was the same substandard assemblage of frail bones and assorted scraps of fatty tissue he had always known. When he tried to flex his right biceps it, as always, continued to snuggle along his upper arm like two ounces of hog belly. Bryant was glowering at it, his disappointment turning to anger against T.D. Marzian and the criminal organization for which he worked, when he heard a low whistle from somewhere close behind him.

"Take a gander at that physique," a man's voice said in tones of awe. "Say, I'll bet you that's Mister Galaxy."

"Nah," said another male voice. "Mister Galaxy can't match those deltoids—he must be Mister Cosmos."

Bryant whirled round, saw two ododdly attired little men gaping at his torso and his rising fury spilled over into words. "Are you trying to be funny?" he demanded. "Because if you are...."

The little men cowered back with a convincing show of fear.

"Not us, sir," one of them babbled. "Forgive us for making comments, but we're both physical-culture freaks from way back, and we've never seen a human powerhouse like you before."

"That's right," his companion put in fervently. "I'd give a million zlinkots for a build like yours. *Two* million."

Bryant glared from one to the other, still convinced he was being hazed; then a curious fact was borne home to him. Malicious fate had saddled him with a body that was undersized and puny, but that was nothing to the trick it had played on these strangers. They barely came up to his shoulder, and their clinging garments revealed concave chests and legs which would have looked more appropriate on stick insects. Bryant looked beyond them and saw that all the other men strolling in the plaza were jerry-built on similar

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lines, and the first glimmers of understanding came to him.

If what he saw was a representative sample, if all the men on this world looked alike, then there was every likelihood that he *was* the most perfectly developed specimen of the lot. Alterealities Incorporated had fulfilled its contract after all, but not in the way he had anticipated.

"I can't get over those pectorals," the first man commented, his gaze fixed admiringly on Bryant's chest.

"And how about those lats?" the second one added. "He must work out for *hours* every day."

"Oh, I like to keep in shape," Bryant said modestly, preening himself. Then a new thought came to him. "Do you think the girls would go for a body like mine?"

"Go for it!" The first man rolled his eyes. "You won't be able to fight them off."

As if to verify his words, there came a series of gasps, giggles and other sounds of feminine delight from somewhere off to Bryant's right. He turned and saw a group of six or seven young women approaching him at considerable speed. They were wide-eyed and pink-cheeked with what appeared to be unbridled desire. After a brief pause, during which they ogled his body from close up, they began to touch him with eager fingers. Others jostled for position, and in less than ten seconds Bryant was at the center of a scrimmage. As he struggled to keep his feet in the confusion, hands clutched at various parts of his anatomy with disconcerting lack of finesse, bodies ground against him, lips were pressed urgently to his, and his ears were bombarded with proposals, the least bold of which required him to nominate his place or hers.

The situation might have been highly gratifying to one with Bryant's history of frustration, except for one unfortunate fact—the women of this world were, if anything, less well-endowed than their menfolk. Sharp elbows and knees beat painful tattoos all over his frame; bony fingers threated to remove pieces of his flesh. The overall effect was akin to being attacked by rapacious skeletons. Moaning in panic, Bryant lunged for freedom, groping in his jacket pocket for the flat shape of the Probability Normalizer.

He found it, pressed the button, and on the instant—his jacket and shirt still draped over his arm—he was standing on the silvery disk in Alterealities Incorporated's New York office. T.D. Marzian and Miss Cruft were gazing at him, the former with cool surprise, the latter with some degree of consternation.

"Were things not entirely to your satisfaction, sir?" Marzian asked blandly.

"Satisfaction?" Bryant quavered, heading unsteadily for the nearest chair. "My God, man, I nearly got torn to pieces!"

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He began to relate what had happened, but had uttered only a few words when it came to him that he was partially nude in the presence of Miss Cruft. Embarrassed, he struggled into his clothing and finished his story.

"Most unfortunate," Marzian said in matter-of-fact tones. "But now you can appreciate the value of our Triple Chance facility—you still have two free transfers in hand."

"*Two?* You mean you're going to count that...shambles?" Bryant was shocked and indignant. "You sent me into a completely wrong sort of universe."

"It was the one you specified. We have your instructions here in your own writing."

"Yes, but when I said I wanted to be the most perfectly developed man in the world, I meant I wanted a new physique. One like Mister America's."

Marzian gave him a barely perceptible shake of the head. "The Probability Redistributor doesn't work that way. You are *you*, sir. You are one invariant point in an ocean of probilities, and nothing can be done to alter that fact. The only realities in which you can exist are those in which you are short of stature and...um...somewhat underpowered."

Bryant, having invested practically every penny he owned, refused to be put off so easily. "Aren't there any realities in which all the men are scrawny midgets, like the two I told you about, and all the women are... well...normal?" Making sure Miss Cruft was not watching, Bryant made ballooning gestures in front of his chest so that there would be no doubt about what he meant by "normal."

"That's hardly logical, is it?" Marzian's voice now had an edge of impatience. "The males and females of any species have to be compatible, to share similar characteristics; otherwise that species couldn't exist."

Bryant's shoulders slumped. "Does that mean I've wasted all my money? All I wanted was to live in a reality where beautiful women would fall over themselves to get at me. Was that too much to ask?"

Marzian stroked his chin with the air of a man intrigued by a professional challenge. "There's no need to despair, Mr. Bryant. Just take a look around you at our own reality. There are lots of extremely unprepossessing men who have more women than they know what to do with. The common factor is that these men can do something better than most others. Women go for success, you see. It doesn't have to be in anything marvelous—singing, dancing, hitting a ball, driving a car.... Is there anything you are particularly good at?"

"I'm afraid not," Bryant said dolefully.

"Well, is there anything you are *fairly* good at?"

"Sorry." Bryant took his newly signed contract from his pocket and began scanning the small print.

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"What's your policy about refunds?"

"How about acting? Or shooting pool?" Marzian was beginning to sound anxious. "Can't you even write stories?"

"No." Bryant shuffled the contract's pages, then paused with a sheepish expression on his face. "There was *one* thing I could do at school—better than anybody else—but it's too stupid for words."

"Try me," Marzian urged.

"Well...." Bryant gave him a tremulous smile. "I could blow bubbles off my tongue."

Marzian placed a hand on the nape of his neck and smoothed some hair down over his collar. "You could blow bubbles off your tongue."

"That's right," Bryant said with some signs of animation. "It's not as easy as you might think. You've got to work up the right sort of saliva—not too thick and not too thin—to form a durable bubble. Then you've got to direct your breath against it at exactly the right angle to separate it from the tip of your tongue—not too high and not too low. And you have to curl your tongue into the right shape, as well. I was the only boy in my class who ever got four bubbles into the air at once."

"Really? Well, I suppose it's worth a try." Marzian tapped some keys on his desk, studied a visual display unit for a moment, then looked up at Bryant in round-eyed surprise. "This business never ceases to amaze me—there actually are other realities in which the principal glamour sport is skimming bubbles off the end of your tongue!"

"And the women are...normal?"

Marzian nodded. "We're talking about Sector One probabilities, which means that everything else is pretty much the same as it is here."

"Can you transfer me to one of them?" Bryant said, with an abrupt upswing in his mood. "One where the all-time champ had never managed more than three bubbles in the air at once?"

"It's at the extreme range of the equipment, but I can do it." Marzian gestured in the direction of Miss Cruft. "You'll need to complete a new authorization."

"Of course." When Bryant stooped over Miss Cruft's desk to fill in the necessary forms, he became aware that she used an extremely heady brand of perfume, but his mind was preoccupied with visions of the slim-waisted sirens who were to be his in his ideal universe. He signed his name with a flourish and strode over to the probability focus plate.

"Good luck," Miss Cruft said.

Bryant scarcely heard her. He took up his position on the silver disk, folded his arms and watched Marzian's fingers flicker over the control panels as they tampered with the very structure of reality. Marzian concluded by hitting the red button and, as before, the transfer was instantaneous.

* * *

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Bryant found himself standing in a busy street in what could have been Manhattan had the buildings been higher and the traffic a few decibels louder. The men and women who thronged the sidewalks appeared normal, and the styles of their clothing differed only slightly from those of the reality Bryant had left behind. He looked closely at passers-by and saw that many of them were attempting to blow bubbles off their tongues as they went about the day's business. Men and women alike were trying, and Bryant was gratified to see that not one of them had any vestige of style or technique. In his ten minutes of watching not one succeeded in launching a single bubble.

Feeling more than a little self-conscious, Bryant moved out of the doorway in which he had been sheltering and began flipping bubbles. His boyhood skills did not return immediately, but within a short time he had begun achieving good separations. Bubble after bubble was lobbed into quivering flight, and inevitably—in spite of the far from ideal conditions—there came a moment when he had two in the air at once. By then he was at the center of a crowd of spectators, and the event was greeted with a rousing cheer. He nodded demurely, acknowledging the applause, and was heartened to see that quite a few of his audience were desirable women and that they were gazing at him with every sign of adoration.

This is more like it, he thought.

A gleaming chauffeur-driven limousine pulled up at the edge of the crowd. The fat man who got out of it was richly dressed and exuded an unmistakable aura of power. Bryant, aware of his scrutiny, speeded up his action and almost at once got three bubbles airborne. The crowd went wild. Car horns sounded as traffic began to jam the street.

"Say, are you a professional?" The fat man had somehow forced his way to Bryant's side. "What's your name?"

Bryant grinned up at him, intuitively sure of what was coming next. "Arthur Bryant, and I'm not a professional."

"You are now—I can get you a million shiller a contest." The fat man indicated his limousine. "Come on."

"With pleasure." Bryant struggled to the car in the wake of his benefactor, got in and found himself sharing the rear seat with two of the most stunning women he had ever seen.

"Girls, I'd like you to meet Arthur," the fat man said. "He's the next world champion bubbler, and I want you to be nice to him. *Real* nice. Got that?" The girls nodded in unison and turned to Bryant with slow-smoldering smiles which caused every nerve in his body to thrum like harp strings.

Bryant sat up in the huge circular bed, rearranged the black satin pillows to support his back, and stared moodily at the beautiful young woman who

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was lying beside him.

Three weeks had passed since he switched realities, and in that time he had become world champion in his chosen field, had made additional fortunes through endorsing a range of commercial products, had bought an island and a yacht, and had just signed up for his first three movies. He had also consorted with a succession of incredibly beautiful and passionate women, and many, many others were waiting in line just for the privilege of being seen with him.

By all his own estimates he should have been deliriously happy—but something had gone wrong with his dream world. Something he had not foreseen.

The young woman beside him opened her eyes, stirred langorously and said, "Do it again, Arthur."

Bryant shook his head. "I'm not in the mood."

"Go on, Arthur baby," she pleaded. "Just one more time."

He tightened his lips obstinately. The effort of flicking thousands of bubbles a day into the air had given him a painful blister where the underside of his tongue rubbed against his teeth. As a result he had had to modify his technique and flick much faster, and the associated hyperventilation gave him dizzy spells and nausea. Into the bargain, he was bored.

The girl purred sensuously and moved closer. "Just once more—just one little bubble."

Bryant put out his much-abused tongue and pointed at it angrily. "There's more to me than this thing, you know," he said with forgivable indistinctness. "I'm not just a tongue—I've got a *mind*. Doesn't it ever occur to anybody that I might want to discuss philosophy?"

The girl frowned. "Phil who?"

"That does it!" On impulse, Bryant snatched his Probability Normalizer from the bedside table and pressed the button. On the instant, he was back in the Alterealities office, sprawling on the floor under the startled gazes of T.D. Marzian and Miss Cruft. The latter's face turned a becoming shade of pink. Cursing himself for not having had the foresight to change out of his silk boudoir suit, Bryant scrambled to his feet and took shelter behind a chair while he adjusted what there was of his clothing.

"It's been three weeks, Mr. Bryant," Marzian said in neutral tones, opening a closet door and taking out a dressing gown. "Have we still got problems?"

"Problems!" Bryant accepted the gown and was slipping it on when a new thought occurred to him. "You seem to have quite a few of these things in there."

An indecipherable expression flitted across Marzian's face as he removed the Probability Normalizer from Bryant's unresisting fingers and dropped it into his own pocket. "Other clients have returned on the spur of the

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moment. Were things getting tiresome?"

"Tiresome isn't the word for it," Bryant said, grateful for an understanding ear. "You have no idea what it's like to be treated as an unfeeling object, to have people simply making use of you night and day."

"That was the reality you specified."

"Yeah, but I didn't *understand.* What I really needed was a universe where I would be appreciated for myself, for the real *me,* as a thinking person."

"And are you?"

"Am I what?"

"A thinking person?"

Bryant scratched his head. "I think so. I mean I go around thinking all the time, don't I?"

"You picked the wrong reality twice in a row."

"Ah, but that was because I didn't think." Bryant narrowed his eyes, suspecting the other man was trying to make him look stupid. "I've thought the whole thing over—and I want you to transfer me to a reality in which I'll be regarded as the wisest man in the world."

"I'm afraid the Probability Redistributor can't cope with that sort of request," Marzian said. "The target is too vague, you see. So many people have different ideas as to what constitutes wisdom. If we tried to effect a transfer under those terms, you'd be diffused into thousands of different realities. You'd become a kind of statistical gas, and you don't really want that to happen."

Bryant considered the prospect for a moment. "You're right—so what can we do?"

"The trick is to particularize," Marzian replied with weary expertise. "You think up something really deep, and I'll incorporate it into the specification and transfer you to a reality where it's regarded as the wisest thing ever said. Do you see what I mean?"

"Of course I see what you mean."

"Go ahead then."

"I'm *going* to—it's just that...." Bryant's voice tailed off uncertainly as he came face to face with the realization that it was much easier to proclaim oneself a thinker than to measure up to the job. "Well, it's just that...."

"We close in ten minutes," Marzian said unhelpfully. "Can't you think of anything?"

"Don't rush me." Bryant placed a hand on his brow and tried to concentrate. "Let me see now... something's coming...."

"Let's have it—I've got a train to catch."

"Okay, here goes." Bryant closed his eyes and began to intone in a hollow voice. "There's no point in fishing for truth unless you are using the right bait."

Marzian gave an unexpected bark of laughter which almost drowned out a low gurgle from Miss Cruft.

"What's the matter?" Bryant said,

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unnerved and deeply offended. "You think that's funny?"

"No, no—it's very...profound." Marzian dabbed something from one of his eyes. "Forgive me—I've been under a strain lately, and my nerves aren't too...." He cleared his throat and turned to the control panels on his desk. "Please step on to the probability focus plate and we'll proceed."

Bryant hesitated. "Don't I have to sign new papers?"

"Not this time," Marzian said carelessly, beginning to tap at his keyboards. "We like to get everything down in black and white for each client's first two transfers, just in case there's any quibbling afterwards, but this is your third shot—and this time you won't be coming back. Whatever reality you fetch up in, you're there for keeps."

"I see." Bryant, now older and wiser with regard to all the hazards of reality-switching, felt a sudden timidity about what he was proposing to do. His first two excursions into alternative universes had been disastrous, and this time there would be no prearranged escape hatch. He hung back for a moment, teetering, then noticed that Miss Cruft was observing his reactions with broody interest. Squaring his shoulders, he stepped on to the silver disk and nodded for Marzian to go ahead.

"Here we go," Marzian said as he finished keying in the new specification. "Good-bye and good luck!"

With a showman's flourish he brought his hand over the red button and pressed down hard.

Nothing happened.

Bryant, who had been unconsciously cringing, straightened up and watched attentively as Marzian pressed the button again and again. The familiar surroundings of the office refused even to waver. They remained solid, immutable, *real.*

"I can hardly believe this," Marzian exclaimed, his jowls turning a lighter shade of grey. "It's the very first time the Probability Redistributor has ever failed to...unless...Wait a minute!" He depressed a few keys, examined dials and instruments, and sat back in his chair looking thunderstruck.

"Fuse gone?" Bryant ventured, wishing he had a technical background.

"The capacitors are fully discharged," Marzian said. "The machine did everything it was supposed to do!"

Bryant had another look around the office, searching for small signs of change. "Does that mean we're all in a different reality?"

Marzian shook his head impatiently. "That can't happen. What it means is that there is somebody in our reality who actually thinks that dumb remark of yours about fishing for truth is the wisest thing ever said."

"But that's impossible! I only made it up a minute ago, so nobody could have...." Bryant's voice faded under the impact of a startling new thought.

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He turned to face Miss Cruft.

She lowered her gaze and began to blush.

"What have you *done?*" Bryant demanded, advancing on her. "You've wasted my third shot! At least, I think you've wasted my...." His voice trailed away again as it came to him that although Miss Cruft was undeniably plump, some parts of her were plumper than others, and concerning those Nature had made a judicious selection. She also had a charming smile and wore sexy perfume, but the thing that attracted Bryant most of all was Miss Cruft's intellect—not many girls could appreciate genuine wisdom when they heard it. Looking down at her, he found himself falling deeply and irrevocably in love.

"I can't apologize enough," Marzian said, still scrutinizing his control panels. "Under the circumstances, I guess you're entitled to a fourth transfer free of charge."

"Forget it." Bryant was so elated that he was unable to resist composing another aphorism. "Far-off pastures are green with fool's gold."

The saying, even to his own ears, seemed to have a flaw somewhere, but the gratified smile it drew from Miss Cruft was assurance that she knew exactly what he meant, and that they were going to share a wonderful future in the best of all possible universes.

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Mr. Wisman's new story is a fantasy about two unusual New Yorkers — a lonely hunchback and his neighbor, a peculiar, shy man named Martin Find.

A Peculiar Man

BY

KEN WISMAN

New York is a city of lonely men. It's a place where one can find anonymity, where one can, in spite of his defects, blend into a crowd. In the small Midwestern town where I grew up, my hunchback and ugliness stuck out like a sore thumb. So I came to the big city whose cold concrete canyons were immense enough to get lost in. And it was here, in the old apartment building where I rented my rooms, that I first came in contact with the remarkable Martin Find.

You can see a thousand Martin Finds in any large city. He strolls alone along the streets or sits by himself in some shabby cafeteria. You can recognize him by his strange smile—a soft, sweet grin that seems to hide some personal secret behind it. His personality is, according to the psychiatrists who know all about such things, introverted—he is walled off from the real world and exists in a universe of his own peculiar making. But just how peculiar Martin Find was I didn't discover until a month or two after his death.

My interest in Martin Find grew out of the following reasons. When I first arrived in New York, I tricked myself into thinking that all I really wanted was isolation. I got a job as a night watchman, the loneliest of occupations. In the daytime I lived in a world of music and poetry and novels. I am a self-educated man. Over the years my shelves swelled with nearly 5,000 books and 2,000 record albums. I deluded myself into thinking that the plays of Shakespeare and the symphonies of Beethoven were enough to nourish my soul. But eventually I realized that, though the beauty of these things never faded, they were not enough—I still yearned for contact with my fellow man.

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I had observed Martin Find as he came and went from the apartment next door. And I thought I recognized in him a situation akin to mine—to all outward appearances he was a lonely man. His shyness (I reasoned) might have been (like my deformity) the barricade that kept people from approaching him. And so I contrived to meet him several times by 'accident' on the staircase or in the street. But these meetings never went beyond a simple hello; I was never able to invite him to my rooms for a chat as I had wished.

My deformities were the usual reason why my overtures of friendship were rebuffed. People had an (understandably) hidden aversion to ugliness. Some were even able to overcome this natural aversion and talk with me—so long as it was not inside my apartment or in a bar or public place. I understood, and I was not bitter, though the experiences had left me sensitive.

In the case of Martin Find I saw through my sensitivity and realized that it wasn't my hunchback or unpleasant features that put him off. No, for he reacted to me in the same way he reacted to other people. He was friendly enough, nodding or saying hello to the other tenants as he passed them on the stairs. But when anyone tried to detain him in conversation, he would smile lopsidedly, screw up his eyes distractedly and hasten away.

The realization that Martin Find had "adjusted" to his existence of loneliness fascinated me. I began to gather, in spite of my embarrassed guilt about "snooping," all the information I could concerning him. As I said, there were people I could talk to, provided I kept my distance. And in dribs and drabs—from the other tenants, the landlady, and the grocer down the block—I pieced together Martin Find's life.

When I first saw Martin Find, he appeared to be a middle-aged man. The fact is he was already in his 70s. He had a boyish face with red cheeks and faded blue eyes—the face of a cherub from a Renaissance painting. His hair was a puff of white that floated in a nimbus around his head. And, as I mentioned already, he always wore that peculiar smile, as though he kept some delightful secret locked inside.

Martin Find was born a block away and lived most of his life in the room he presently occupied. His father had been some sort of official attached to an ambassador; his mother had been an educated woman. The parents wanted Martin to become a doctor or to study law. But he had a love for the humanities and chose liberal arts. From what I gather he had a particular interest in the Middle Ages.

While Martin Find was in his third year of college, his father passed away. The shock made him drop out of school for a year. When he returned, he was in the process of completing a master's degree when his mother died. People said that this was the time he (always a shy, introverted man) began

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o withdraw completely. Soon after he funeral, he left the United States and traveled. His mother had willed him a considerable sum of money, and the apartment rent was paid promptly by mail each month, though Martin Find didn't return for seven years.

Where Martin Find traveled was a matter of speculation. Some said Europe, others the East and Middle East. That he visited all of them was probably the correct guess. What he did in these places was also a matter of conjecture. Some said he wandered from city to city trying to bury his grief in a bottle. But the Martin Find I saw was a sober man. And so I preferred to believe in the second version, that he spent his time in libraries engaged in research.

What this research was no one could say. When he came back to the States, some said they saw books delivered to the flat. These books were huge volumes, and the landlady said she saw a few of the titles through the wrappings. Two appeared to be in Latin and the other Hebrew. By this, and the fact that he had an interest in the Middle Ages, my own guess was that Martin Find (because of the shocks to his mind) had taken refuge in mysticism and alchemy.

The facts of Martin Find's story rewakened a desire in me to make his acquaintance. Surely his liberal arts education gave us a great deal of common interests. And I confess I daydreamed of his coming to my apartment where we argued amiably over the works of favorite authors or sat sipping cognac and listening to symphonies.

One night I bolstered up my courage, went to his apartment and knocked.

"Ahhh," Martin Find said, opening his door.

"I—uh—uh," I stuttered. My sensitivity reasserted itself; I feared another rebuff. "Could I borrow an egg? I'm fresh out."

Martin Find disappeared and reappeared with an egg. After handing it to me, he did a strange thing. He grasped my free hand, shook it gently up and down and said "Thank you" in a soft voice. Then he shut the door.

Soon after this incident, I lost interest in Martin Find, for I had become involved with a girl. For a long time I had put off going to 42nd Street to 'buy a woman's love.' All my sympathies rebel against the idea of prostitution. But I am, in spite of my external deformities, still a man with a man's needs and desires and weaknesses. And what other recourse is there for a man such as me?

The first few weeks I went I was refused by all the prostitutes, and I actually felt a kind of relief. Then, one day, I was approached by a girl who agreed to take me to her room. Thus began my relationship with Lena.

Though she claimed to be 21, I knew Lena was much younger—she was a child-woman. She had a round,

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open face (when she was relaxed) and a spray of freckles across her nose. Her hair was blond, and she was short and thin, though not unattractive. If not for the cold exterior she often affected, she would have seemed like any average teenager.

I returned to her each Monday and Tuesday night, the days I had off. She claimed these were slow nights for her profession and allowed me to remain several hours in her room. Here I slowly drew from her the story of her life, which was a recounting of beatings and rape by her step-father and cruelties committed by her alcoholic mother. Lena had run away when she was thirteen.

There was a wound deep down inside Lena, which is why we two got along as well as we did. It would be a lie to romanticize our relationship, such as it was. Lena had her cruel side. Life had made her that way. Often she would treat me in a half-mocking way, poking fun at my hump and ugliness. And she adopted the name that the other prostitutes called us: Beauty and the Beast.

Perhaps I was a bit masochistic, but I didn't mind her jokes. Besides, I was falling in love. Sometimes I played the fool for her or the clown, just to see her laugh. I read parts from Shakespeare's plays, and she liked my rendition of the monster from *The Tempest* best. I brought her little gifts and gave her what money I could. And she gave what she was able to give, and in her own way I think she loved me in return.

The most tragic thing about her was her addiction. I always knew when she had been using drugs. They (sadly enough) brought out her kinder, warmer side. I never stopped trying to talk her out of her drug use and the type of life she led, though I did it subtly and softly because lectures only angered her or left her depressed.

One night I came to Lena's flat and saw that she was high but very upset. Her condition gave me the courage to propose that she move out of that section and move in with me. And, I added in a whisper, we could even consider marriage.

Instead of the laughter I expected, she grasped my hand and said softly, "My beautiful beast. I know you have a beautiful soul. But all I would see is your ugliness if I moved in with you. Let's just go on the way we are."

She said it with such gentleness I knew she wasn't mocking me, that the simple truth was she could never accept my deformities. I in turn accepted her honesty and never brought up the subject again.

Thus we went along for seven months until that day she failed to show up in the coffee shop—the place where we usually met on Mondays. I waited an hour, then went to her room and pounded on the door. There was no response. I ran up and down the streets searching for her, checking every bar and cafeteria. Then I ran into

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another prostitute, an acquaintance of Lena's.

"Haven't you heard?" she told me. "Lena died four days ago. Drug overdose."

I don't have much memory of what happened afterward. I must have wandered from bar to bar drinking myself into a stupor.

Two days later, around 4 in the morning, I stumbled into my apartment building. While I was fumbling for my keys, I heard a moan from behind the staircase. Curled in the shadows, pale and clutching his heart, I found Martin Find.

"Mr. Find," I said, "what's the matter?"

"Please," he replied in a hoarse whisper. "Please take me upstairs."

I'm a strong man and Martin Find was light. I picked him up in my arms and carried him the seven flights to his room.

(It wasn't till later, when the shocks had worn off, that I was struck by the strangeness of his apartment. The living room was unfurnished except for a well-worn easy chair that faced an equally well-worn couch. Between them was a coffee table with two glasses and an empty bottle of port wine. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought Martin Find was in the habit of entertaining.

There were no pictures on the walls. There were no books, surprisingly so for someone who was supposed to be educated and of scholarly temperament. And there was no record player, or radio, or television—the usual forms of entertainment one would expect in a bachelor's room.)

I put Martin Find into bed. "I better call a doctor," I told him.

"No," he said gently. "I'm all right. I'm all right now."

"It seems to me you've just had a heart attack," I said.

"A bit of indigestion," he replied. "I'm all right now." He smiled.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked.

"No, thank you," he said.

I sighed and turned to go. Then he reached up and grabbed my hand and shook it as he had done several months ago.

"Thank you," he said, and he closed his eyes. "You will have your reward. Thank you very much."

He seemed to sleep, so I tiptoed from the room.

In my own apartment I moved a chair next to the wall so that I could listen if Martin Find called. But the emotional drain and effects of the alcohol soon sent me into a deep sleep. At one point I awoke and heard Martin Find's voice; what's more I thought I could hear other voices answering. I was too weak to investigate, and I fell into a deeper slumber.

Upon awakening in the late afternoon, I went to Martin Find's apartment. The door was open a crack. I pushed it and went in. And there was Martin Find sitting in the easy chair facing the couch. He wore the same

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peculiar smile he had worn all his life, though Martin Find was now quite dead.

A day or two after the funeral, the landlady came to me and handed me an envelope.

"I found this amongst Mr. Find's effects, such as they were," she said. "It was addressed to you."

When she had left, I tore the envelope open. Inside was a short, cryptic note:

Below the window, in the base board. The treasure lies inside.

But in those days I had no stomach for mysteries. I crumbled up the message and threw it aside.

For many weeks I was depressed. I took up drinking to drown my self-pity. Several times I thought about suicide. Then one day I overheard a conversation between the landlady and another tenant.

"It's the weirdest thing," the landlady was saying, "but I haven't been able to rent poor Mr. Find's old room. I've had a couple dozen in to look it over. But, you know, they all say the same thing. It's a coldness about the place. God strike me down if I'm superstitious, but I wonder if poor old Mr. Find is hanging around and scarin' prospectives off for reasons of his own. Lord help me, but I get that feeling when I'm in the flat."

That night I was stumbling in from one of my many binges when I noticed that Martin Find's door was open. I went through the empty living room and somehow wound up in the bedroom. Kneeling down, I struck a match and ran the light across the floorboard. There was a tiny little knob which slid a panel aside to reveal a compartment. Inside was a notebook containing hundreds of sheets of paper covered with a flowing script. I brought the notebook to my apartment and collapsed into bed.

The following day I found Martin Find's notebook where I had dropped it. The writing was in Latin, but interspersed amongst the lines were names I recognized—poets, composers and famous historical persons. I lost no time in acquiring a Latin-English dictionary and spent my nights translating.

And what I found was this: each of those sheets, which had been copied from ancient books of alchemy and magic, contained an incantation for summoning forth a single spirit of the dead. My attitude toward the occult had always been one of open-minded skepticism. But, I said to myself, what did I have to lose?

So I set up the paraphernalia, and I burned the incense, all as Martin Find outlined in his notes. Then I chose the incantation for summoning Shakespeare and read.

With a pop and a blue flash, the poet appeared seated in the chair before me. "Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?" he said to me.

"My god!" I replied. I rose from my chair and went up to the poet and pulled his beard.

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Shakespeare screamed. "Heavens, man! What are you about?"

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "But you see I had to make sure you were real. That is, that you were solid and not just a phantom. Because, after all, a phantom would be no better than hiding in my books and fantasies—Do you see?"

"You might have asked," said Shakespeare, stroking his beard angrily.

But I soon patched it up by offering him some port wine.

For several weeks afterward, I summoned him forth. It happened that three of his plays had been lost to antiquity, and he had total recall. Night after night, Shakespeare, an accomplished actor as well as a poet and playwright, entertained me by reciting the parts to his lost plays.

And some nights I chose the magic formula for summoning forth Beethoven, and we had stormy discussions (though he had to hold a horn to his ear to hear) over the course music had taken in the past two hundred years. And there were a score or more famous men that I summoned and who filled up my evenings with stimulating conversation. For some reason—perhaps my shyness or my sensitivity—I refrained for a long time from summoning forth women.

With the help of my spirit companions, who assured me that love was shared with total freedom in the afterlife, I began to overcome my shyness. But it was a conversation with Shakespeare that decided me:

"Tell me," I had asked, "doesn't my—appearance—bother you?"

To which he answered: "When one passes on to the other life and is summoned back to this, one no longer sees a man's outer appearance. One sees into a man's soul. My dear man, you have a particularly handsome soul, and it is a handsome soul that I see."

And so I dug deep into the notebook, came up with three incantations and summoned forth the greatest beauties of history. Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, Marie Antoinette appeared in my room. But I soon became disillusioned with their company. Cleopatra was somewhat cruel, Helen of Troy a bit cold and aloof, and Marie Antoinette selfish and vain.

About this time I came across the very last sheet in Martin Find's notebook. Across the top, in Martin Find's flowing script was my name and the words "Thank you." My voice trembled; my hands shook. But somehow I was able to complete the incantation. The figure appeared in the chair.

(And how had Martin Find found out? Who or what had informed him about my life? This, like so many of the other unknowns, will remain a mystery in the remarkable Martin Find's life.)

"As I've always said," smiled the child-woman before me, "you have a beautiful soul."

I clasped her hand. "Lena," I whispered. "Lena, my own."

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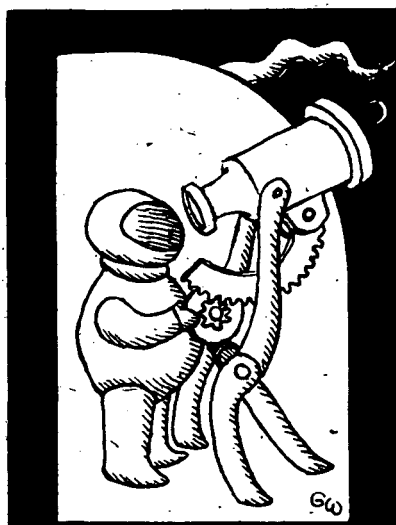

LIGHT AS AIR?

Those of you who follow this essay series know that I am fascinated by coincidence.

I don't attach any supernatural importance to it; I know it is inevitable, and that lack-of-coincidence would be more surprising than any coincidence. And yet, when it occurs —

Not very long ago, my wife, Janet and I were walking down a neighborhood street, having just eaten at a local restaurant, and Janet casually pointed out a small shop named "Levana," where she bought Middle Eastern bread and pastries.

She pronounced it as spelled, and I corrected her and gave it the proper Lithuanian-Yiddish pronunciation. I then went on to explain that it was the Hebrew word for "moon," because I know that she enjoys having me inform her of all sorts of miscellany that I dredge up from somewhere within me.*

A distant memory stirred of the days, four decades back, when I used to attend Yiddish musicals that featured a hilarious comic named Menasha Skulnik.

**At least, I* think *she enjoys it.*

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"In fact," I said, "one of the most famous Yiddish popular songs of my childhood featured the word."

Despite the fact that forty years had passed during which I had not once, to my conscious knowledge, heard the song or thought of it, I proceeded to sing the first line, "Shane vie die levana" ("Beautiful as the moon") with the correct tune, I assure you.

Two minutes after that, we reached a second-hand bookstore, and since Janet is constitutionally incapable of passing a second-hand bookstore without walking in, she entered, and I, of course, followed.

Two minutes after we had entered, the proprietor (who also sold second-hand records) put on a record for some unknown reason, and you know perfectly well what it was. It was Menasha Skulnik, singing "Shane vie die levana."

Intellectually, as I told you, I understand coincidences and don't allow myself to be impressed by them. Emotionally? — Well, that's another thing altogether.

I became totally incoherent. I jumped up and down. I pointed to the record-player and finally managed to gasp out, "That's the song! That's the song!" to a totally flabbergasted Janet who thought I was having a fit.

And it was indeed a fit of a sort. I could feel my ears buzzing, my vision darkening, and a fearful internal pressure. I knew my blood pressure was hitting the ceiling and that that silly little concatenation of events was bringing me within measurable distance of an apoplectic stroke.

So I forced myself to stand still, close my eyes, take a deep breath, and think of something neutral — and the danger passed.

But the thought of my blood pressure led me on to think of pressure in general and that brings me to the subject of the present essay.

The pressure to which we are most accustomed and to which we are all constantly subjected is the pressure of the air upon ourselves. The atmosphere, having mass, is attracted by the Earth's gravitational field and therefore has weight. Consequently, it weighs down and presses upon us just as surely as a lump of iron would.

Nor does it merely press downward. Gases (and liquids, too) flow, so that the pressure is transmitted in all directions, sideways and upwards, as well as downwards.

We don't feel the pressure of the weight of the atmosphere, because the liquid contents of the body's cells exert the same pressure in every direction. The atmosphere presses inward on our body, and the body's liquid

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contents press outward; the two balance and we feel nothing.

The pressure of the atmosphere varies from time to time, by the effect of temperature, of height above sea-level, of air movement. The internal pressure of the body varies to suit, but not always rapidly enough. When the pressure changes more rapidly than usual, some of us have feelings of malaise.

The Eustachian tube is too narrow to allow a rapid equalization of air between the middle ear and the outside, so when we change elevation rapidly, as in an elevator, we have to swallow to let our ears "pop."

We can, however, specify standard conditions. We can suppose that we are dealing with quiet air at 0° C at sea-level. In that case, what is the air pressure?

The simplest answer is "1 atmosphere," where an "atmosphere" is defined as the pressure of Earth's air blanket under standard conditions.

This sounds as though we are arguing in circles, but it has its useful aspects. If I told you that the air pressure on Venus was about 90 atmospheres and that on Mars it was about 0.01 atmospheres, you would have something that was informative.

Nevertheless, to say that the pressure of our atmosphere is 1 atmosphere does seem to leave us a little short of content. Can we do better?

In ancient times, no thought was given to the fact that air might have weight and exert pressure. The sensation of weight was absent, and it seemed reasonable to accept that as evidence that the reality of weight was absent as well. Therefore we still have "light as air" as a familiar cliche, and are perfectly capable of speaking of "airy nothings."

It was noticed at various times, however, that no matter how well built a pump and no matter how assiduously people worked the pump handle, water could never be raised more than about 34 feet above its natural level.

The reason for this is that a water pump pulls some of the air out of the pump's interior. The air pressure on the water surface outside is thus greater than the air pressure within the pump, and that excess air pressure outside pushed water up the pump cylinder to a height where the water pressure inside plus the diminished air pressure balances the total air pressure outside.

By the time the water reaches a level of 34 feet above its natural level, however, it exerts a pressure all by itself that is equal to the external air pressure. Nothing more can be done; the water can be pumped no higher since there exists no additional air pressure outside to do the job.

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Careful measurements at 4° C (when water is at maximum density) shows that the weight of a column of water 33.899 feet high produces a pressure that exactly balances air pressure. We can therefore say that:

1 atmosphere = 33.899 feet of water
or 11.230 yards of water
or 406.79 inches of water

This view that air had weight and exerted pressure was compellingly demonstrated in 1643 by the Italian physicist Evangelista Torricelli (1608-1647), who substituted mercury for water. He filled a four-foot-long tube (closed at one end, of course) with mercury and tipped it into a trough of mercury. Some mercury ran out, but only some. A column of mercury was left standing, held up by the air pressure outside.

Since mercury at 0° C is 13.5951 times as dense as water, a column of mercury of given cross-section will weigh as much as a column of water of the same cross-section that is 13.5951 times as high as the mercury column. This means that if air-pressure balances 33.899 feet of water, it will balance 33.899/13.5951, or 2.493 feet of mercury. Torricelli did indeed find that the mercury column stood at the height it was supposed to as closely as he could measure it. We can therefore say that:

1 atmosphere = 2.493 feet of mercury
or 29.92 inches of mercury

Torricelli did more than demonstrate that air has weight and exerts pressure. It did more than explain why water (or any liquid) can only be pumped so high. When some of the mercury poured out of Torricelli's tube, it left a vacuum behind, the first good vacuum ever produced by human beings. A vacuum produced in this manner is therefore called a "Torricellian vacuum." As if that weren't enough, Torricelli had, by means of his ingenious demonstration, invented the mercury barometer, an instrument which, to this day, varies from Torricelli's tube only in detail.

By using a column of mercury and measuring its height from time to time, we can detect changes in the "barometric pressure" of the atmosphere.

As weather conditions vary, as temperature goes up or down, as stormy weather with rapid air movement succeeds calm weather and vice versa, as the barometer itself is moved from place to place, the measured air pressure changes to a minor degree. Since such changes (experience tells us) mark whether the weather will change, and how, the barometric pressure and the direction of its change, whether up or down, is an invariable accompaniment of the weather report.

The barometric pressure never varies very much, of course. The highest

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recorded value at sea-level was not quite 32 inches, and the lowest just under 26 inches. Except under exceptional circumstances, however, the barometric readings stay within less than an inch of 30 inches of mercury.

To be sure, the "inch" is an outmoded unit of length. The world (with the exception of a few nations of which the two most powerful are the United States and Liberia, in that order) uses the metric system. A unit of length in the metric system is the "meter" which is equal to 39.37 inches. A "centimeter" is 1/100 of a meter, or 0.3937 inches (or about 2/5 of an inch). A "millimeter" is 1/1000 of a meter, or 0.03937 inches (or about 1/25 of an inch).

Since 29.92 inches equals 75.97 centimeters, we can say:

1 atmosphere = 0.7597 meters of mercury
or 75.97 centimeters of mercury
or 759.7 millimeters of mercury

Usually, of course, the measurements are not given their fullest precision. If asked what the value of 1 atmosphere is, the usual answer would be "30 inches of mercury" in the United States, and "760 millimeters of mercury" everywhere else.

So far, though, I've only been comparing weights, and matching up the pressure of a column of water or of mercury with a column of air. There is, however, an important difference between weight and pressure.

Suppose we had a cylinder that was one square inch in cross-section. If it contained mercury to the height of 30 inches, there would be a certain weight of mercury resting on the square inch at the bottom of the cylinder.

Suppose next that we had a cylinder that was four square inches in cross-section. If it contained mercury to the height of 30 inches, there would be four times the weight of mercury in this cylinder as in the smaller one, but that quadrupled weight would be resting on an area four times as large as in the previous case. The weight on each square inch would be the same in the two cases. Once we define pressure as "weight per unit area" then the cross section of the tube doesn't matter, only the height.

If we wish to describe 1 atmosphere in terms that are immediate and dramatic, then, we should ask: "What is the weight of a column of air that is resting upon one square inch of our bodies?" It would equal the weight of a column of mercury 29.92 inches high and one square inch in cross-section. The weight of such a column of mercury is 14.696 pounds and therefore:

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1 atmosphere = 14.696 pounds per square inch

This is invariably startling to anyone who first comes across the fact. Mark out a square inch on your arm, or on any part of your body, for that matter, even the most delicate; and there is a weight of 14.696 pounds of air pressing down upon it (or sideways, or up — for air pressure is exerted in all directions equally).

The total surface area of a rather pudgy person of average height (me, for instance) is about 2,950 square inches. That means I bear upon my body, a total weight of 21.7 *tons* of air.

Yet I move about freely.

Partly, this is because the weight is evenly spread out over me. What counts is not the total weight, but the weight per unit area — that is, the pressure. Even more important, the internal pressure of my fluid contents (as I said earlier in the essay) exactly balances the external air pressure.

The crucial nature of the difference between weight and pressure can be shown by a thought-experiment. Imagine an ounce weight resting upon your forearm. Nothing much happens. Now imagine a needle on your skin, point downward, and an ounce weight balanced on the top end of the needle. The needle will puncture your skin.

In the first case, the ounce weight is distributed over a considerable area of your skin, and the weight pressing down on any region as small as a needle point is very tiny. With the needle between the weight and the skin, all the downward push of the weight is concentrated on the tiny area of the needle's point. The pressure at that point is enormous, and the needle is forced through the skin.

Again, when you drive a nail into wood, you place the pointed end on the wood and hammer the flat end, and in it goes easily. If you placed the flat end on the wood, no amount of hammering the pointed end would do you any good. Even more dramatically, you place your thumb on the flat end of a thumb-tack and the pointed end on the wood and press. The feeble push of your thumb is enough to drive the pointed end into the wood because the pressure transmitted through the point is enormous.

Pounds and inches are, however, passé.

Since a centimeter is 0.3937 inches, a square centimeter is 0.3937 X 0.3937 or 0.1550 square inches (or about 2/13 of a square inch).

The metric unit of mass (usually used also for weight) is the gram, which is equal to 0.0020462 pounds (or, roughly, 1/450 of a pound). Therefore one pound per square inch equals 70.307 grams per square centi-

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meter. Multiply that by 14.696 and you have:

1 atmosphere = 1033.2 grams per square centimeter.

It is also possible to use kilograms as the unit of mass (or weight) and square meters as the unit of area. A kilogram is equal to 1,000 grams. A meter is equal to 100 centimeters so that a square meter is equal to 100 X 100, or 10,000 square centimeters. Therefore, one kilogram per square meter is equal to 0.1 grams per square centimeter. It follows that:

1 atmosphere = 10,332 kilograms per square meter

Pounds and grams and kilograms are units of mass, and although they are casually used as units of weight as well (even by scientists) it is wrong to do so. Weight is proportional to mass, but weight is *not* mass.

The sensation of weight is the result of a response of Earth's gravitational field. The atmosphere is attracted to the Earth and pushes down against the Earth's surface thanks to its interaction with Earth's gravitational field. This *push* is what gives rise to the sensation of weight and a push is a "force." If we are dealing with pressure as a weight per unit area, we should properly seek to make use of units of force.

Using units of mass for weight is easily understandable and will solve our problems adequately as long as we remain at Earth's sea-level and deal with gravitational interactions, such as columns of air, water or mercury. If, on the other hand we deal with something such as the hammering of a nail or the pressing of a thumbtack, we find we can no longer make sense out of weight per unit area. After all, as you wield the hammer harder and harder, its weight doesn't change. The force it exerts does change. We *must*, then, use force per unit area.

To work out the units of force, consider that a force is a push or a pull that brings about an acceleration. In fact, it is the presence of an acceleration that demonstrates the existence of a force.

Suppose there were a force capable of causing a mass of one gram to accelerate at a rate of one centimeter per second per second. That is, you start with a mass of one gram at rest and therefore moving at 0 centimeters per second. The exertion of the force would mean that one second later the mass is travelling at a speed of one centimeter per second in the direction the force is pushing. Another second later and it is moving two centimeters per second. Yet another second later and is it moving three centimeters per second, and so on.

Such a force has a magnitude of "one gram-centimeter per second per second." Scientists, even as you and I, however, would find it boring to be

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continually repeating "gram-centimeter per second per second" and they replace it with the syllable "dyne" from a Greek word meaning "force."

The unit of force then is the dyne, and one dyne is capable of accelerating one gram at a rate of one centimeter per second per second. A force of two dynes would accelerate two grams at a rate of one centimeter per second per second, or one gram at a rate of two centimeters per second per second, and so on.

One gram of weight pressing down upon a square centimeter exerts a force of 980.68 dynes upon that square centimeter. Since an atmosphere is equal to 1,032.2 grams per square centimeter, we can also say that:

1 atmosphere = 1,013,200 dynes per square centimeter.

As long as we deal in dynes per square centimeter, we can handle the pressure on a nail, or that of rocket exhausts in the same way we deal with pressures arising from weight.

The only trouble is that "dynes per square centimeter" has six syllables and that the number 1,013,200 is large. People are continually dealing with air pressure, and the use of seven digits and six syllables can be wearying after a while. Fortunately, we can always invent a term and define it appropriately.

Scientists define a "bar" (from the Greek word for "heavy") as 1,000,000 dynes per square centimeter. That means that:

1 atmosphere = 1.0132 bars

This is very convenient, since if anyone wants to make a quick rough estimate that involves atmospheric pressure, you can so arrange matters as to let it equal one bar and that simplifies the arithmetic enormously.

Of course, many pressures that are dealt with are much smaller than atmospheric pressure, and for that purpose you can use the "millibar" which is equal to 1/1000 of a bar. You can therefore say:

1 atmosphere = 1,013.2 millibars

In recent years, there has been a move to get some order out of the metric system. After all, you can measure pressure as grams per square centimeter, kilograms per square decimeter, hectograms per square meter, milligrams per square kilometer, and so on. You can measure force as gram-centimeters per second per second; kilogram-meters per minute per minute; milligram-decimeters per hour per hour; and so on.

These all involve metric units; all are equally valid and useful under the proper circumstances. Still, if different people use different combinations of metric units, there is always the necessity of converting one into the oth-

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er in order to compare results and observations. These conversions are pitfalls of possible arithmetical errors, for they involve the shifting of decimal points, and everyone who has ever tried to shift one under stress knows that they are just as likely to move in the wrong direction as in the right one.

There is now, however, come into use something called, in French (the international language of measure, since it was the French who invented the metric system), the "Systeme International d'Unites," which is "International System of Units" in English. In brief, it is referred to as the SI system of units.

In the SI system, users are restricted to specific units for the various types of measurement: the meter, for instance, for length, the kilogram for mass, and the second for time.

A dyne is one gram-centimeter per second per second, but neither gram nor centimeter is basic in the SI scheme of things. The dyne is therefore not an SI unit and should not be used.

The unit of force in the SI system is one kilogram-meter per second per second. Since a kilogram is equal to 1,000 grams and a meter is equal to 100 centimeters, a kilogram-meter is equal to 1,000 X 100 or 100,000 gram-centimeters. Hence one kilogram-meter per second per second is equal to 100,000 gram-centimeters per second per second; that is, to 100,000 dynes.

For simplicity, one kilogram-meter per second per second is defined as one newton, after Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who first defined a force in terms of acceleration. Therefore, one newton equals 100,000 dynes.

I earlier gave the measurement of pressure in terms of dynes per square centimeter, but the centimeter is not a fundamental SI unit, either. We have to use the square meter and measure pressure in terms of newtons per square meter. Since a newton is equal to 100,000 dynes and a square meter is equal to 10,000 square centimeters, one newton per square meter is equal to 10 dynes per square centimeters.

In SI units, then:

1 atmosphere = 101,320 newtons per square meter.

To speak of newtons per square meter is to make use of six syllables. Therefore one newton per square meter is referred to as one pascal, after the French mathematician and physicist, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) who, in 1646, demonstrated that barometric pressure decreased as one went up a mountainside. (Actually, Pascal didn't go up the mountainside himself. He sent his brother-in-law, with two barometers, scrambling up there. — But, then, what are brothers-in-law for?) Consequently,

1 atmosphere = 101,320 pascals.

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There you are, then. I have given you air pressure in terms of every type of unit I could dredge up. All are equally valid and each has its conveniences.

Yet it doesn't exhaust the subject since there are other pressures than those of the atmosphere. We'll go into that in the next essay.

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Ted Thomas used to write "The Science Springboard" column for F&SF and has been an infrequent but high quality contributor for almost 20 years (most recently with "The Family Man," (March 1978). This story takes the new and exciting theme of genetic engineering and extrapolates it further than anything in our experience.

The Splice

BY

THEODORE L. THOMAS

The etched label on the flask read 500MLS—BECKMAN. The flask rested on the desk top surrounded by the four, black-bound laboratory notebooks. Each notebook had a broad red diagonal band across its cover carrying in gold the legend CONFIDENTIAL. Ellis Raush absently traced the red bands with his finger, staring at the flask and its pearlescent contents. Twenty years of work were all here on the desktop. He had known it was nearing the end, but now that it was actually in front of him, it was hard to accept. He took a deep breath. Then the habits of a lifetime took over and he pulled the notebooks close, opened the covers and skimmed them again. It was all there, but he had to check his people to make sure. He pulled the phone over and dialed the Gene Injection P3 facility. "Mike? Ellis. Do I read this report right? You know for sure that you placed the Eight-Kay unit right where we hoped you could place it?" There was the expected injured tone from Mike. "Mike, of course I don't doubt the work. It's just that after eleven years it's nice to know that some typist didn't make a mistake. No problem. And I'll see you at the symphony tomorrow night, right? Tell Gwen to wear that white thing. So long."

Next, the call to Professor Herbert Morris. "Just making sure I read this right, Herb; you know how it is when you get to be sixty-eight. You built Mike's chain into the entire chromosome, right? Okay, bridge on Wednesday, and it's Tony's turn. Nothing but pretzels and cheese again, I'm sure. Why don't you say something to him? No? He plays such lousy bridge I'm not going to complain about his food, too. See you then."

Two more calls verified it. The or-

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ganisms that had come into his laboratory had been what they were supposed to be. He had no doubts of the work of his own small group; twenty-eight good scientists working in three separate laboratories under his personal control would not go wrong. There was no doubt of it. The work of the entire project was done. He felt drained.

It was several minutes before he could make the next call. "Joanie? Dad. Look, will you collect Ray and the children and come to my lab in about half an hour?" He then sat and listened to all the reasons why it was impossible for a family of five to drop everything just before dinner to make an unplanned visit, especially when Ray was to give a short talk to the liberal arts faculty at eight thirty on Insanity and the Creative Imagination. "Joanie, I know this is an imposition. But tonight the work of three thousand six hundred and seventeen scientists and technicians has dropped into place. Give the children and Ray a sandwich to eat on the way over, throw out your dinner, and come. And one other thing. Don't mention this call to anyone."

Now, Joanie, the daughter of a Nobel Laureate, and a full professor of mathematics in her own right, saw that something unusual had happened. She said quietly, "See you in half an hour, Dad."

Ellis Raush leaned back, and this time he gasped for breath, and his hands shook. He clasped them together and leaned forward and rocked over them, and in a few seconds he was in control again. He touched an intercom button and said casually, "Josh, bring in six pipettes will you?"

It took Josh ten minutes to collect the pipettes, put them in a beaker, and carry them to Ellis Raush's office. He placed them very, very carefully in the middle of the desk. But instead of leaving, he stood there and looked at Ellis Raush. Raush said, "Thank you, my old friend. You might just as well go home now; I won't be needing anything else." But Josh did not leave.

Raush looked at him a moment and said, "What is it?"

Josh said, "Doc, you sure you want to go through with this?"

Stunned, Raush stared. Josh's age had long been a facility joke. No one knew how old he was, but the consensus was that it was somewhere in the late eighties. He had been a glassware washer when Ellis Raush first met him in that university laboratory forty years ago, and they had been together ever since. The word in the scientific community was that Josh had seen deep inside Ellis Raush when Raush was twenty-six years old, fifteen years before the Nobel Committee came around the first time, and twenty-five years before the Committee came the second time. Josh had run the supply and equipment requirements of every laboratory Raush headed. They had been together too long for Raush not

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to know now exactly what Josh meant when he said, "Doc, you sure you want to go through with this?"

Raush said, "Josh Reber, have a seat."

Josh sat, and Raush said, "I set up this whole procedure with the idea to keep it away from you, because I knew if I could do that, I could keep it away from everybody. How many of the others know?"

"Not sure. I kind of think that some of them have an idea of what's going on, but you've got it set up pretty good—" he pronounced it "purty"—"so I can't tell. Look, you really want to lay it out like this?"

Raush leaned back and spread his arms and said, "What else? Look where all of us are heading. Nothing but trouble ahead. My way has got to be better. If we...."

"Hey, Dad." the door burst open and five bubbling people poured in, led by Joanie. "How come you're starving your doting family to death?" The grandchildren swarmed over him as Joanie kissed Josh Reber on the cheek. Chris, age seven, stood alongside him to give him a kiss while Lori, five, and Gary, three, both tried to climb up on his lap at the same time. Ellis Raush waved at Ray Evans, his son-in-law, while at the same time he tried to help up the two youngsters. Everyone, except Ray Evans, was talking at once. Evans was by no means a quiet man, but compared to Joanie and the three children, he was an introvert. Raush smiled at Evans, and Evans smiled back, oddly handsome with one blue eye and one black. Raush sometimes wished the children had inherited Ray's gene for two-color eyes rather than Joanie's gene for talkativeness.

"All right," said Raush. "Let's settle down here so I can tell you why you're here." The two children settled back in the corners of his lap, but Raush knew that would last only about thirty seconds. Josh Reber got up to leave, but Raush asked him to sit down. Raush said, "I just this minute found out Josh knows everything I'm about to tell you. So," he settled back, looking over the tops of the two small heads, "I brought you here to give you all an inoculation." He nodded at the flask. "The work of our group on recombinant DNA has succeeded in producing this modified organism so that none of us will ever have a food problem again."

Ray Evans, Professor of Philosophical Evolution, said gently, "We haven't exactly been starving, Ellis."

Raush chuckled, "Not us, Ray. Everybody, everywhere. This is a modified Escherichia coli, the bacterium that thrives in human intestines, in everybody. I have modified it so that it can now digest cellulose. It can break cellulose down into sugars and peptides and other nutrients."

Joanie gave a long, low whistle and said, "Human beings digest cellulose?"

"Right. They can digest grass, leaves, bark from trees, algae, marine plants, wood, if they can get it down,

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any vegetable matter. The result is, no more food problems in the world."

Ray Evans said, "That's quite a piece of work, Ellis. There's another Nobel in it."

"Not this time, Ray." Gary straightened out and slid off his lap, and Lori followed. They began prowling around the office. "This work, all of it, is illegal."

Joanie looked startled. "How so? You've done a great thing."

Ellis Raush smoothed his mussed trousers and ticked off his recitation on his fingers. "One, I used my own strain of E. coli instead of K12 strain. Two, I combined the E. coli DNA with that of protozoa from both the termite and the manatee. See how that works? The termite assimilates most land-grown cellulose, while the manatee digests most marine cellulose. People won't even have to cook the cellulose. Just swallow it and E. coli does the rest. Three, I've hoodwinked my colleagues and the authorities. Four, the containment controls were not what they were supposed to be. Oh, I could run out of fingers."

Joanie, keeping a wary eye on the two prowling children, said to Raush, "If it's illegal, what are you going to do with it?" She did not seem particularly concerned about the actual legalities.

"System's all set up. This E. coli lives outside the human body, particularly in water, for some months; it's much stronger than the other strains. It almost has a nucleus now. We'll spread it via the water systems. And it is safe. Our team of about four thousand people has worked nine years on this phase checking every step of the way. Look here." He picked up a pipette and using the rubber bulb drew up a millimeter of the liquid from the flask, tilted his head back and let it run into his mouth. Instantly the three children clustered around his chair. Raush picked up another pipette and looked expectantly at Ray and Joanie. They hesitated, looking at each other. Josh Reber got up, went over to the desk, filled the pipette that Raush had used, and let it drain into his mouth. At this, Gary started jumping up and down, wanting some, and Lori quickly did so too. Chris, in the dignity of his full seven years, said, "May I have some please, Grandpa?"

Raush waited. Joanie did not talk now; she simply sat and looked at Ray. There are many decisions to be made in the raising of children, some of them hard ones. But few were as hard as this one, and so they sat and looked at each other. Raush reached out and tousled Gary's hair, and there was something in that gesture that turned it for Joanie and Ray—affection, love, almost adoration of the grandfather for the grandchild, the unspoken commitment of the old to the young they love. Joanie and Ray smiled at one another and turned and nodded at Raush. He quieted the pandemonium as best he could while he inoculated the three children, youngest first. Then, after Joanie and

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Ray took theirs, Raush sat back and said, "It's a good thing we've done. Can't you see how it will be—

—a hundred years from now?"

Warren Vann picked his way through the crowds on the moving belt, working his way to the bottom of 42nd Street. When he came to the Oshkosh Hotel, he got off and stopped to look ahead. He could just see the corner of the United Nations building, all rectangular and glass and dirty concrete. He went into the hotel, waiting his turn at the door. The long, narrow lobby was lined with mirrors, even on the ceiling, seeming to triple the number of people already jammed into the lobby. Vann picked the shortest line, yet so many people in that line had a problem that he finally arrived at the hotel desk in a longer time than had he chosen the longest line. Yet, the clerk had his reservation, and Vann paid cash for both the room and the key deposit and went on up. He let himself into the room and dropped his duffle bag on the bed. He could touch both side walls with his outstretched hands, and three brisk paces took him from one end to the other, but at least he was alone. He took the rocket launcher from the duffle bag and slipped it under the mattress and patted the corner to smooth the bed. The mattress was naturally lumpy anyhow, so nothing showed through.

It was too early to make his call. So he flicked on the wall TV and turned to the All News, All The Time channel.

Brazil, and the banks of the Amazon, all the way up to Itacoatiara, were lined with simple huts amid the lush greenery. The copter swept along the river to show how the trees with the acid-tasting leaves had been replaced with the succulent bamboo. The bamboo stems for building, the bamboo leaves for eating, and the water for drinking, easily supported a thousand kilometers of people packed along the banks. But there was trouble. Scattered settlements upriver along the Madeira, not content with basking in the shade all day, were washing ores, fouling the river with the effluents. There were too many people too close to the operations, and they were muttering.

China, and the water table in vast areas in the Hoppo region had fallen. There were too many people to feed on the short supply of rice, even though they ate the entire plant and not merely those tasty grains, and so they were bringing in soy bean plants to take up the slack.

In Spain after a year of careful surveillance, the Custodians had closed in on a group of forty-one people who had conspired to explore recombinant DNA work. Despite the worldwide sanctions, this outlaw group had wanted to pick up the work where it had been left off a hundred years earlier and carry it forward. The pictures on the screen showed them as

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they were arrested, a seedy, sullen, and surly group. Then the pictures showed the same group after they had been lobotomized, a happy, healthy, and contented group.

Vann watched as the scenes changed from crowded Kansas cornfields where the cob was now the main source of nutrition to the Mississippi delta where the people were living in a foot of water at the edge of the Gulf. Everywhere there were complaints of too many people, even though there was plenty of food. But the solutions? Ah, there was the problem. Half of the peoples of the world shouted for birth control and moderation.

The other half shouted for complete freedom to do as they pleased with no restraints; after all, everyone knows it is the duty of mankind to breed. There was a small segment that wanted the iron bans on genetic research lifted and the Custodians disbanded so that human water-breathers could be produced and people could live in the sea. And everyone knows the seas are limitless.

The name and face of John Reber cropped up in many of the scenes, as it always did. John Reber, whose face and voice were as well known to the crowds living in Tonga near the wellsprings of the White Nile as to the throngs in the salons of Paris. Yet even John Reber, this latter-day black Messiah, had so far been unable to persuade the peoples to exercise birthing restraint. Even he had been unable to break the credo: unlimited food, limitless people.

It was time for Vann to make his call. He shut off the TV and briefly considered making the call from his room, but he knew it might be traced.

Vann left the hotel, rejoined the crowds on 42nd Street, worked his way down to First Avenue. He stood in line at a public phone, finally got in, dropped his dollar in the slot, and dialed.

He said, "Mr. John Reber, please. This is Peter Struther, and I am ready to fit Mr. Reber's suit when convenient. Yes, I'll wait."

He stood through the clicks and the holdings and the buzzes while the code name Peter Struther worked its way up to John Reber who came to the phone and said, "Glad the suit is ready, Mr. Struther. I'll send a person to meet you so we can set up a suitable time for the fitting, if you will forgive the expression." They both laughed and casually set up a meeting in the lobby of the Waldorf to discuss a fitting time.

The meeting in the lobby went swiftly, and the actual meeting between Reber and Vann was set for eight o'clock at the wall overlooking the marina at 134th Street, upriver side.

Reber had two other people with him when they met at eight o'clock. The four of them hung over the wall like other rubbernecks, looking at the lovely boats, talking quietly among themselves.

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Vann said to Reber, "Do we have to do it this way? For you, I mean. Not for me. You mean so much to so many people."

One of Reber's companions, short, stocky, black, handsome face, deep resonant voice, dropped one of his huge hands on Reber's shoulder and said, "John, see? Do we have to go this far?"

The other companion, long narrow face, great blue eyes, his long flowing hair tucked under his collar, said to all three of them, "This way we can be sure. Any other way may fail." He gasped, and the tears that had been locked under his eyelids flowed over and raced down his cheeks and dropped from his chin. Reber reached over and gently rubbed the back of his hand down each cheek to dry the two wet streams.

Reber shook his head and said, "My dear, dear friends. We've been over this before. We may be wrong, but what we do gives people the best chance to find their way. No sooner does the human race solve its major problem than it creates another. No. Tomorrow is the day. Now," he turned to Vann, "this is the way it will go. About five and one-quarter minutes after I start to speak, I will use the words, 'These changes are so vital to humankind that I would gladly lay down my life to bring them about. I pray that all of you join with me on this...' and then you shoot. Do you see the timing?"

Vann nodded numbly, and Reber put a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently and said, "You and I, my friend, that's all there is to it. Now, you have the sketches we sent you of the gallery?"

Vann nodded.

"You now have the timing. Your equipment all set?"

Vann nodded.

Reber pulled Vann to him and kissed him on the cheek and turned and walked away in the dusk. It happened so swiftly that his two companions had to trot to catch up with him, and Vann was left standing alone. He turned and stared down at the boats. Somebody had once said that leaders were not really leaders; they merely put themselves out in the forefront of the way the people were going anyway. Well, maybe so. But here the people stood at the crossroads—this way or that? And tomorrow's actions, if he and Reber had it right, would control which road.

At ten-thirty the next morning Vann entered the lobby of the United Nations, the speech-making center of the world. He flowed in looking like the rest of the crowd that pressed in on him from all sides. He wore a jaunty hat and a bright shirt, and no one would have thought that his tightly wrapped umbrella was a seven millimeter rocket launcher. The two exquisite rockets lay clipped to an inner pocket, looking like a pen-and-pencil set. The slightly longer one was a seeker rocket containing among its

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miniature circuitry a picture of the face of John Reber. The shorter one was set for blackness plus a microsecond delay after impact.

He passed the guard with his nose in the air and was obviously extremely bored when the metal detector beeped. One of the guards scanned him with a hand-held detector and isolated the problem as being the umbrella and the pen-and-pencil set. She was more interested in his one blue eye and one black eye than she was in the metal he was carrying. She passed him.

He went on up to the gallery in time to select a back seat a few steps from a back corner. He took his seat and chatted with his neighbors and fiddled with his umbrella and his pen. He had just finished loading when the venerable John Reber stepped to the dais to speak.

The members and the spectators rose and applauded, and millions of people in their own homes clapped, too. Here was a most respected man, one who as a youth had helped the people of Equatorial Africa achieve equality with the rest of the world by shipping leaves of tropical trees to feed the people in Northern Africa where vegetation was sparse. He had about him an aura that built confidence, and a gentle manner that made people love him. And when the applause died out and he began to speak, even the children fell silent and listened.

Three minutes into Reber's speech Vann slipped out of his seat, disturbing no one, moving quiet as a tiptoe. At four and a half minutes he slipped off the Tracon cloth from the umbrella. At five minutes and ten seconds he glanced quickly around at the entranced people and positioned himself, beginning to raise the launcher in the direction of that beloved face. When he heard the words "...all of you join with me on this.." he squeezed the release. The tiny rocket flew true. It entered the head directly between and slightly above the eyes, penetrated the frontal bone, and exploded. The head snapped back, seeming to drag the entire body with it and drop it to the floor out of sight behind the dais.

Vann put the second rocket in place and set the butt on the floor, all in one quick movement. He put the muzzle in his mouth, and just before he squeezed the release he thought of Reber's words. "It is worth whatever we have to do. Can't you just see how it will be—

—a thousand years from now?"

The hills of Pennsylvania were bright green even though it was June and therefore cold. Jahn Rash stood on the crest of the hill and saw that the green of the trees this early in the season was due to the fact that this was a pine forest. He wrinkled his nose. He was not particularly fond of pine needles. He was a maple-leaf man himself, not at all like the Pinus Brethren. Those people ate pine

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needles twice a day, and if you were downwind of them you could smell them coming. Well, he might have to get used to it.

He looked across the gentle valley to the slopes on the other side, and he could just make out the ruins of the brick buildings. As he scanned the far slopes, he could see more and more buildings, and some of them seemed in good condition. Between some of the buildings were open regions sprinkled with bushes. Lawns, he remembered. The Pennsylvania State University had been famous for its expanses of great lawns. This might not be so bad after all. Once summer came they could raise grass and dry it and put it away for the long winter. Hah, pine needles might not be needed after all. And he swung off down the slope feeling much better.

He seemed alone among the buildings, but he went deeper into the campus looking for other people. "Hey, there." A voice hailed him from inside a building.

He went over to the window and said, "I am Jahn Rash, come to stay awhile."

A whoop came out of the other person, and he stepped to the window and reached through the broken glass to shake Rash's hand. "We been expecting you, about given you up, where you been, any trouble?"

"No. I didn't want to risk taking public transportation, and it takes a long time to walk from North Carolina. I had to stop and make some clothes for here. Cold."

"Well, you're here. Come in. No, through the door." Rash was so used to stepping in and out of windows in the ruins throughout the country that he had started to do it here. "My name is Trask, and we're just getting ready to set up the operation. What're you eating?"

"Any leaves. No pine needles, unless I have to."

Trask laughed. "We're not there yet, although we may come to that. Lots of good maple leaves here." They had walked to an interior room, and Trask waved at a pile of dried leaves in the corner, next to a wooden bucket of water. "I'm going to get the group together. I'll send somebody around for you in about fifteen minutes. Glad you got here, Jahn. We need you."

Rash sat down and leaned against a wall near the pile of leaves. He sampled one of them. Good quality, must be zinc-rich soil here in the mountains. He laid about twenty leaves flat, one on top of the other, and bit down on the stack in the manner of the deciduous leaf-eaters everywhere. Since the leaves were dry, he did not eat the ends of the stems; that would wear down his teeth too fast. He washed down the last swallow with a gulp of cool clear water. He was washing down the third stack when he heard footsteps, and a girl came in. She thrust out her hand and said, "I'm Ann Sheps, one of the inorganic chemists in the group. You're

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Jahn Rash." She did not ask it, she said it.

Rash climbed to his feet, still holding her hand, and said, "I'm an organic chemist."

She said, "Good. We don't have enough of those. Let's go." She dropped his hand and turned away.

"A moment, please. Another swallow of water. Would you like some?" He held out the cup.

She shook her head impatiently, and while he drank he looked at her. She wore loose-fitting wool clothes, several layers, in fact, but he could see she was lean and wiry, with shoulders so wide they made her look skinny, and she had one blue eye and one black. Her belt was from the hide of an animal with the hair still on, and the belt buckle was a rectangular plate of metal abraded along the lower edge where it had been used to scrape rocks. There was a thin line of a green stain along the upper margin of her upper lip. The stain, plus the buckle, placed her as a lichen eater. All this he saw as he swallowed the water. He bent to replace the cup with an air of satisfaction at having identified her, and she resented it. She spun and strode out of the room. He had to hurry to catch up and stay with her as she led the way over the ragged campus the half mile to their destination. She did not speak, and she kept her head half turned away from him all the while. He wondered what he had done to offend her.

They came to a sturdy building with stone columns, several of which had collapsed. They started to go in, but Rash grabbed her elbow and swung her around to face him. She kept turning, swinging her left arm, hand open, and hit him squarely on the right side of the face. She stepped into it as she swung, so there was a lot on it. It flattened him. He rolled to his feet and crouched, ready to spring at her. Ann Sheps dropped into a crouch, too, and for a long moment, they stood like that, like two cats ready to pounce. Then the idiocy of the situation struck Rash. He burst out laughing and straightened and rubbed his cheek. She looked at him, puzzled.

He said, "All I wanted to do was find out why you're mad at me before we go in. I did something to hurt you back there, and I want to say I'm sorry. That's all I wanted to say. I'm sorry."

There was genuine concern on his face, and she knew he meant it. She stepped up to him and gently touched his flaming cheek. "I'm sorry, too. I thought you were being...well, smug, back there. I'm too sensitive to that sort of thing. It's all right now. I'm sorry I hit you."

"You throw a mean punch. Must be all those minerals in the lichens you eat."

She smiled. "That's the idea." They went on in.

Inside was a great room with shelves around the walls. Some of the shelves still held books and magazines

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covered with dust and mold. There were about twenty people there, evenly divided among men and women. Rash liked it that way; nobody would have to cope with a harem. He went around the room shaking hands, hearing names and promptly forgetting them, amazed at the scope of the sciences represented there. Others came in after him until there were about thirty-five people standing around talking.

Trask said loudly. "Find seats, please, and let's get started." He waited until the group settled. "It's taken four years to get you all together. There are some other skills we could use, but we could not safely locate them. So we'll have to make do. I think we can carry out our program of gene-splicing without them."

Even though they all knew why they were there, the use of the forbidden words stirred an irrational uneasiness in most of them; such is the effect of impressing taboos on people when they are very young. Trask noted the clearing of throats and the shifting of positions and said, "Well, we have to get used to talking out loud about molecular biology from now on. All right. We've set up different buildings around here for different operations. If any of the groups finds that they should be somewhere else—perhaps closer to another operation—let us know and we'll relocate. Now, we've put some equipment we think each group will need in your location, but you will know better than we. I think we can get almost anything you think you need, but it may take time. We have another group based some distance from here that will keep us supplied."

One of the savanna dwellers spoke up, aggrieved. "What are we doing way up here where it's cold all the time? Why can't we work where it's warm?"

"Yes," said Trask. "All things considered, we think there is less likelihood that the Custodians can find us here. Not many people live in these climates anymore. This university has been abandoned for a long time, although some agronomists have been here all along. While we are on the subject, I want to point out to you the danger here as we see it. You know how we got in contact with each of you. Well, we reached some others who decided not to join us. We took the precaution of not telling each person contacted where this operation would be until you made your commitment with your suggested research program. Nevertheless, I must assume that the Custodians know that this operation is going on somewhere in the world, and they are trying to find it, although there must be other groups like ours. If anybody sees the slightest sign that the Custodians are on to us, tell me. None of us want to be lobotomized." He stopped. "And, now, I must say to you a thing I regret." He hesitated, in obvious distress. He

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spoke softly when he continued. "In spite of all our care, we might have a Custodian among us." Rash found himself looking around with all the others. "I'm not trying to make you suspicious of all your co-workers; I don't think we could get the job done under those conditions. I don't really think we have one here, but what I am urging is this: don't you—each of you—do anything that might create suspicion in the others. Don't make any unexplained trips. Don't poke into any groups unless you have a need to know what they're doing. Go out of your way at all times to keep everything you do open and understandable. Make no maps of our layout here. Keep no records of our people. See what I'm saying? All of us must always be on the lookout."

Rash felt better. He said, "What do we do if we find a Custodian?"

"We kill him." The words were quiet, but the group reflected on them, each one wondering if he really could.

"Well," Trask broke the gloomy silence. "Here's the way we've got the operation set up physically." The library they were in would be the operations center. The chemical and mechanical engineers would go into the three-unit building called Hammond. The chemists would go to Deike. The botanists and agronomists would stay in Pattee along with the medical doctors. The physical chemists and physicists and programmers would go to the standing portion of Old Main. There was much discussion about where these places were, and what was there, and how to heat them, and how clothing and food would be distributed, and, finally, how soon they could start.

"We start now, this afternoon. And as a final thing for now, I have a surprise for you. Nobody here has questioned whether or not we will succeed, and that's good. But I want to assure you now that our chances of success are far better than you would have had the right to think. Look what I have." He lifted the top of a metal container that had lain on a nearby table. It measured half a meter on a side. He removed four objects, each encased in a transparent bag, and each wrapped inside the bag. Trask slipped the object out of the bag and unwrapped it. It was a large, flat book, and Trask soon had three more unwrapped just like it. The four books lay in a row on the table, and one after another the people in the group got up to see better. The flat books were old, very old, and once they had been black. They were gray now, but the broad red band still showed red, and the yellow letters CONFIDENTIAL were still readable. Trask stepped back and said, "These are the actual notebooks of Ellis Raush, the man who started it all over a thousand years ago. They were confiscated and sealed in Archives until they were slipped out about five hundred years ago. We've got them. They are the most advanced texts on recom-

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binant DNA available in the world, and they will move our work along immeasurably."

They crowded around, and the excitement crackled in the air. Trask stepped up again and turned a few pages to show they were in good shape. He said, "Those of us who've been here have all memorized them, and we have copies for the rest. There is something in them for all our groups. So go through them carefully; you may want to modify the approach to your work that you took when you gave us your suggested research program."

Ann Sheps said, "What did he splice to what?"

"He modified E. coli, but we're going way beyond that. We are going to modify human sperm. And we will be needing donors of a lot of sperm and a few eggs from among you from time to time. The physicians will handle the egg donors, but you sperm-donors..." he permitted himself a slight smile "...may want to see if you can find a helpmate." As Trask said it, Rash without thinking looked over at Ann Sheps. She met his eyes and smiled slightly, and he smiled back, and it was settled.

The people left and went to their buildings and studied the notebooks and looked over their equipment and began to make their plans. Some actually got to work right then. Others sat with pencil and paper and changed their plans. In two days Jahn Rash actually began assembling amino acids to form tailored blocks, short ones at first, and then longer ones as he built confidence and knowledge. Ann Sheps worked in an adjoining room crystallizing the catalysts he used to control the placement of the individual amino acids. In a month he made a DNA fragment. He found he had to guide Ann Sheps in the placing of the right atoms in the inorganic molecules of the catalysts to carry out his purposes. She had to learn much of his organic chemistry to grasp the whole problem, and they found themselves working closely together. They finally knocked out the wall that separated their two laboratories. By this time they were inseparable, together day and night, working as though they were a single, melded, chemist.

The entire operation grooved in. Up at dawn, work through into the twilight six days a week. Saturday night they all got together in the library for talk, games, and horseplay. Sunday was a day for reviewing the week past and getting ready for the week ahead, a day of reading and consulting. Then came Monday, and the tempo resumed. The months strung into years. The equipment gatherers at the outside stations maintained the flow of essentials or reasonable substitutes, and they kept an eye on the traffic in the region. Several times they intercepted interlopers. In each case they explained that these hills of Pennsylvania were the situs of the

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grandest sect of all, the Mother's Milk and Green Berry People. Each stranger was asked to stay and join and take part in nightly ceremonies, the description of which generally caused in the stranger a blanching of the face and a tightening of the lips. In each case, when the stranger heard the details of the rite of initiation, he walked on by. And so the work went on and the results grew and the sperm flowed and the time came when the end was in sight. It was Ann Sheps who discovered the Custodian in their midst.

She said to Rash one day, "Something serious has happened to Will Stebbens. He is nearing some deep emotional crisis, and I don't know what it is."

"Maybe he and Bertha had a falling out."

"It's not that kind of feeling. Something inside him is making him draw away from all of us, not just one of us. He feels to me as if he's separating himself from the group."

Rash stiffened when he heard that. He spun on his heel and paced back and forth, thinking. He said, "See what that might mean? If he's mentally and emotionally leaving us..." He let the sentence dangle. "Don't say anything of this to anyone. I'll look into it."

"But I want to help."

He shook her shoulder affectionately. "We may have to do something drastic, and I don't want you near if we do; you might get hurt emotionally. I'll take care of it."

Rash took Trask aside and told him his thoughts. Trask called in Baer and Sanger, two of Stebbens' co-workers, and the four of them set up a twenty-four hour watch on Stebbens. Trask conducted a careful search of all Stebbens' belongings and found nothing. Baer searched their laboratory, and at first, found nothing. He checked further. Taped to the underside of a glassware drawer he found a dozen sheets of paper clipped together. He skimmed them, put them back, and met with Rash and Trask, apart. "It's a summary of the people in each group, where they are, what their goals are, and approximately how far along they are. It shows the best route through the woods to each group at night and how many Custodians would be needed to round up each group. It's all there."

Rash said, "Any way to know how he was going to get the papers out?"

Baer shook his head. "The early part had something about why he was here, but I didn't have time to read it. We'd better look at it more carefully."

Trask shook his head. "Better than that. We'll get Hank Geyser to inject a couple of milliliters of potassium nonagyral solution, and Stebbens will tell us everything he knows."

They set it up. They took Stebbens out of the area to the site of the old Beaver Stadium and one of the cement-lined locker rooms. They gave Stebbens his shot and they showed him the papers and for a full three days they asked him questions.

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There was time. The pickup was a month away, down at the bottom of the hill where the town used to be, behind a loose building block. No contact had been made before. The Custodians did not have a good idea of what they were doing and were relying on Stebbens' report. Knowing that, Rash said, "Well, we'll have him write another report. This one will show just how harmless we are." It took another two days and three more shots before Stebbens' second report was finished in his own handwriting. It was much like the first one in layout, but it said that the group was seeking an elixir of youth scientifically. They weren't being very successful, but they were all working hard at it on a tight schedule interspersed with harmless sexual orgies. They hid behind the facade of the Mother's Milk and Green Berry people because they didn't want the group to grow too large. There was no recombinant DNA work in prospect. The report ended with a recommendation for a checkup in five years; meantime, forget it. Rash and Trask carefully compared the two reports and decided one was as authentic as the other. "Well," said Trask, looking at Stebbens, "that's about it." His eyes clouded over.

Rash said, "I'll do it." He picked up a thick piece of firewood, stepped behind Stebbens, and with one heavy blow to the head, killed him. Loathing for the Custodians was such that Hank Geyser looked down at the body with the crushed head and said, "I think our version of lobotomy is better than theirs." They buried the body near a wall and returned to the main group. A week later they put the second report behind the loose building block in the dead of night.

Besides some head shaking and some quiet, extra conversations, the episode had little effect on the group. The work was rolling, they could see the end, they could think of little else.

On a Saturday night about six months later, Trask asked to be heard. The games stopped, quiet fell. He said, "We've got it. We can tailor the chromosomes the way we want and produce motile sperm to carry them. From here on it, it is simply a question of production and distribution. The sperm will produce on the average a person who is unusually strong physically, unusually bright mentally, and with unusual motivation. We could have built many more features into the chromosomes, but it seems best to leave that to future generations. Once they break out of the contraints of the Custodians, they can decide which way to go. Anyhow, we'll ship the sperm in one-millimeter capsules adapted to dissolve in a slightly acid environment. One capsule should impregnate any woman in estrus. The sperm in the capsule should be viable for at least one hundred days. Once we get our system operating, that should be enough time to spread the capsules around the whole world. There's going

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to be a lot of virgin births in the future, but what the hell; it won't be the first time. So..." he took a deep breath and looked around, "...have fun over the weekend. Monday we start production and distribution. It's going to be hard, boring work. Whenever you get tired, just think how it will be—

—ten thousand years from now"

Phys One stepped out on the porch and stretched. The sun was warm and strong and it glinted off his golden, downy fur and washed over the gleaming snowcap on Pike's Peak twelve kilometers distant. Phys One stretched again, reaching forward and up with his long and powerful arms, rising to the tips of his toes, almost wallowing in the cold wind and warm sunshine. Decision Day was here, and he wanted to make sure he was cold enough to be at his mental best. He chuckled as he thought of Philo One, tiny and hairless, getting ready for the meeting. Eight thousand kilometers away Philo One would be seeing to it that he sat in the shade at a temperature of at least a hundred C. And Soci One, all fat and cartilage, down at CenAm would produce the drizzling rain and the gentle wind that she loved so much. Around the world the fifteen Ones, the ones with the three-kilogram brains, would be settling down for the discussion, for this was Decision Day.

Phys One touched the amplifier in a molar, and he was ready. The amplifier made it impossible for anyone except another One to speak on the circuit. Everyone in the world could listen, and most probably would, but no one could interrupt.

It was common knowledge among the Ones that the internal nervous system circuitry of Phys One, both biological and mechanical, was stronger than that of the rest of them; he came in louder and clearer than any. For this reason he acted as a sort of unofficial discussion leader. He said, and his subvocalized thoughts carried round the world, "Let's start. In my thinking, I think we should do it. There seems no persuasive reason why the human race should confine itself to this Solar System, or this galaxy. Let us do what is necessary to spread."

Arts One, with the twenty-centimeter-long fingers, said: I find myself offended by thoughts of the form the human race might assume among the stars. You scientist types tell me if I'm wrong. These starships—ion-drive ships you call them? —will each be equipped with complete facilities for recombinant DNA research. That right?

A chorus of assents from Chem One, Biol One, and a belated one from Nucl One.

Arts One: Then I can see the chance that somewhere on a far planet the human race may take the form of a slime creeping over a muddy surface. I find that an offensive thought.

The others reflected. Phys One laughed to himself, suppressing broad-

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cast; Arts One had conjured up quite an image there.

Philo One: I don't find it offensive. The physical form doesn't really count. The intelligence does. If a slime has the requisite intelligence, particularly if it emanated from us in the beginning, why, I would have no problem with it.

The Ones held back agreement or disagreement, not wanting to put pressure on Arts One, waiting for her to find her own position. She quickly did. They all felt her quiet nod of assent.

Philo One; While the form of the future race does not bother me, something else needs pointing out. Sometime in the future—a million years from now, a hundred million years from now—we may meet one of these new forms somewhere, somehow, and we might not recognize it. It might not recognize us. Might this be a problem?

They reflected. To their surprise the answer came from Arts One: I see nothing wrong with treating every life form we may ever meet, anywhere, anytime, as if it were human. The assumption will be warranted. Are we all not brothers and sisters?

The silence on the network this time ran on. It was clear to all that the philosophical hurdles had been overcome. Phys One: Any strain on our resources to do this?

Mech One, with a body like a short section of tree trunk, said: None from my end. We're thinking in terms of a thousand ships. Plenty of metals in the asteroids, plenty of energy from the reactors. Plenty of labor such as might be needed from Phys One's people. We can do it in two years.

Astr One, speaking from his bucket-like container in the orbiting observatory, said: Each ship will have a designed life of two hundred thousand years, and we'll direct them to regions promising of planets.

Biol One, of the seven-fingered hands, said: The crews will be tailored to live in space and for initiating any settlements. All supplies are abundant.

The moment was at hand to say it, but there was silence. Phys One sensed the reluctance to make the hard, final decision, and so, Phys One: Two things. First, there really is nothing in all our concepts of the processes of evolution that says the living entity undergoing evolution cannot enter the process and direct it the way it wants as we've been doing. In fact, I suggest that that may be the inevitable end result of evolution. Second, we have no major problems on Earth any more; we control everything. Look back over the ages of our history and see what we've done. First, we had a problem of food, and we overcame it. Second, we had a problem of overpopulation, and we overcame it. Third, we had a problem of retrogression, sloth really, and we overcame that. We don't have a major problem anymore. Now we can spread to the stars. We may be making problems for the deep future we don't now foresee. I hope so. But the solving

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of them will be good for our progeny, good for the future of the race, whatever it may be. We've done it all here. Let's move out and find some new problems to solve.

The reluctance disappeared, and there was complete agreement over the network.

Philo One: That sort of thinking is supposed to come out of me.

Arts One: Pure poetry, in a way. I'll develop it.

Biol One: Heady stuff.

Mech One: Great, I'm starting today. We'll all be in touch.

Phys One cut off the amplifier. He felt exultant, but not because they had made the right decision; he had known all along they would. He felt exultant because now it was time again to run in his beloved mountains. The sprinting along the trails, the feel of the pull of the muscles as he swarmed up the face of a cliff, the dash across rock falls. He swung off the porch and dropped ten meters to the side of the mountain. As he turned to run, a wind eddy swept up a tiny snow crystal, spun it through the air, and deposited it in an eye. He dropped the nictitating membrane and felt the crystal quickly melt, and he laughed as he wiped a tiny tear from the eye, the blue one.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 26

In the November issue we asked for "imaginary collaborations," and somewhere into the second hour of reading the entries, became fairly faint with an overpowering feeling of *deja vu*. Sure enough, one competitor (and only one) finally pointed out that *we had done this one before*, a scant five years ago (March 1976). Our apologies, the comp editor is getting old and forgetful. You are all to be congratulated for coming up with such good and fresh entries the second time around. Best of the repeats were: *334-2001: The Number of the Beast* and *Roadside Picnic Stand on Zanzibar*. The first and second place winners this month live within a few blocks of each other in Manhattan.

FIRST PRIZE

The Roads Must Roll Up the Walls of the World by Heinlein and Tiptree
Isle of the Dead Little Fuzzy by Zelazny and Piper
The Beast that Shouted Love At the Brave Little Toaster by Ellison and Disch
Blow Ups Happen When Worlds Collide by Heinlein and Wylie
If All Men Were Androids Would You Let One Marry Your Electric Sheep? by Sturgeon and Dick
The Deathbird Goes Dingo by Ellison and Disch
Barefoot in the Brillo by Aldiss and Ellison

—Susan Milmore
New York, NY

SECOND PRIZE

The Moon Is A Brave Little Toaster by Heinlein and Disch
Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Continued on the Next Rock by Tiptree and Lafferty
Barefoot in the Furnace by Aldiss and Silverberg
Schwartz Between the Bed Sheets by Silverberg and Lief
Houston, Houston, Do You Read the Book of Skulls? by Tiptree and Silverberg
Come to Venus, Melancholy Baby Is Three by Disch and Sturgeon

—Jeff Grimshaw
New York, NY

RUNNERS UP

Fun With Your Neutron Star by Niven and Disch
Again, Persistance of Vision by Ellison and Varley
I Have No Reproductive System and I Must Scream by Ellison and Sladek
We Also Serve Man, by Heinlein and Knight
Nine Billion Short, Short SF Stories by Clarke and Asimov

—Jim Detry
Urbana, IL

The Man In the High Castle Is A Harsh Mistress, by Dick and Heinlein
San Diego Lightfoot Who? by Reamy and Budrys
The Sheep Look Dispossessed by Brunner and LeGuin

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A Case of Stolen Faces by Blish and Bishop
We Who Are About to Get Off the Unicorn by Russ and McCaffrey

—Pat Cadigan
Kansas City, KS

The Man in the Odd John by Dick and Stapledon
The Persistance of Conan by Varley and Howard
The Very Slow Galaxy Reader by Watson and Pohl
Golem^{5,271,009} by Bester and Bester
The Stainless Steel Rat Wants Some of Your Little Fuzzy by Harrison, Sturgeon and Piper

—S. Hamm
Brooklyn, NY

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Universal Baseball Association by Verne and Coover
The Mouse That Roared, Dandelion Wine! by Wibberly and Bradbury
I Will Fear No Evil, Not To Mention Camels by Heinlein and Lafferty
The Word for World Is Borogoves by LeGuin and Padgett

—Michael Tippens
Atlanta, GA

Who Can Replace A Broke Down Engine? by Aldiss and Goulart
The Downstairs Room Is Room Enough by Wilhelm and Asimov
The Beast That Shouted Get Off the Unicorn by Ellison and McCaffrey
The Man Who Sold the Player Piano by Heinlein and Vonnegut

—John Nieminski
Park Forest, IL

COMPETITION 27 (suggested by Anne Jordan)
Send us up to a dozen bumper-stickers for your craft (space, anti-gravity, etc.) of the future; e.g.:

I BRAKE FOR ASTEROIDS

I'M O.K. I'M O.K.
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Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by March 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 27 will appear in the July Issue.

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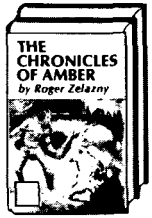

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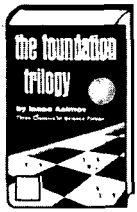

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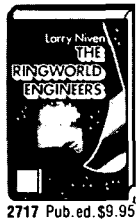

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